# RED RUST

CORNELIA
JAMES
CANNON

"Fad"

from

Hand

Xmas 1931

# RED RUST

*By*

CORNELIA JAMES CANNON

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1928

*Copyright, 1928,*
By Cornelia James Cannon

*All rights reserved*

Published February, 1928
Reprinted February, 1928 (twice)

THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS PUBLICATIONS
ARE PUBLISHED BY
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY COMPANY

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To*
*my father and mother*

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/redrust0000corn

# RED RUST

# CHAPTER I

As he came up from the coulee and faced the sharp wind which swept across the level prairie above the river, Matts drew his rude sheepskin coat more closely about him. The cold wind of the early winter was more penetrating than had it carried snow. He could not remember that ever, as a small boy in the dark winter days in his childhood home in Sweden, he had shivered so much as he did in the brilliant sunshine of the Minnesota of his adoption.

"But no one," he thought to himself, "ever remembers being cold after he has once been warmed. I probably froze my cheeks then as often as now."

He touched his tingling face to see whether it felt numb, but, reassured by its sensitiveness to the pressure, slipped his hand back into a mitten. He called encouragingly to the oxen as they strained into the yoke up the last grade. The heavy homemade sled on which he rode was loaded with cordwood. In a hollow between the logs at Matts's side, carefully wrapped in straw and covered with empty grain sacks, lay a box full of the eggs which had been collected from the nests in the barn during the week. The snow, snatched up from the side of the road, was blown on the sled, where it rested a moment before it was whisked away again, swirling across the white fields like driven mist.

When the oxen had dragged their load over the top of the steep slope from the river, they stopped without waiting for a signal and stood with drooping heads and dilated nostrils, taking deep breaths of the cold air. Icicles were

hanging below their muzzles and their chests were rimed with the frozen white vapor of their breathing.

Matts stepped off the sled, and stamped his feet to warm them, looking at the oxen with admiration in his eyes. He had watched them grow from frisky little wobbly-legged calves to the gentle, powerful creatures who did his bidding to-day, and his pride in them was as great as his affection. Through many an hour of slow hauling across the gently rolling country he had talked to them as to human companions, and he had found them at least as sympathetic as most of the men with whom his life was cast. He had spent time which his father would have thought better employed behind the plough teaching them to come to his call, and, as a reward for their obedience, had slipped into their ready mouths many a handful of grain which that thrifty farmer would have thought a foolish waste of valuable food.

After the oxen had rested a few minutes, their breathing slowed and they lifted their heads as if ready to go forward again. Matts, who had been walking up and down, beating his arms across his chest to warm himself, climbed back to his seat on the logs and gave the sharp, explosive signal of the ox-driver for the start. The oxen lurched forward, their slow, swaying motion carrying the sled irresistibly over the tops of the rough ridges in the road and through the deep snowdrifts in the hollows.

Matts looked at the familiar landscape, to the eye of youth so unchanging and so unchangeable. Patches of woods alternated with open spaces. Oak trees, with their rustling, brown leaves still clinging to the limbs, gave a warm glow to the horizon, and taller maples and elms lifted delicately etched branches above them, firm and black against the clear sky. The clearings were rough with unburned stumps against which the snow piled in its fitful drift toward the south.

Five miles away Matts could see the steeple of the little, unpainted Lutheran church which marked the site of New Sweden, pointing its sharp cone into the arching sky above it. The region had been recently opened to settlement, and Matts's father, five years before, had moved from an older community in the southern part of the state and with some Swedish immigrants just arrived from the old country had taken up the new land with the hope of making a permanent home for himself, his wife Brigitta, and their two children, Matts and Olga. Three other children had been left in the quiet little cemetery on the edge of the village in Sweden from which they had come. In their native land, from their earliest married days, ill luck had seemed to attend the Swenson family. The crops failed, child after child died, Brigitta walked in melancholy, and Nils himself, always silent and uncomplaining, began to lose courage for life. Then, when there seemed nothing but failure ahead, a brisk and enthusiastic steamship agent came to the village full of tales of the fortunes to be made in America. He did not spare words when describing the free land to be had for the asking and the leisure and plenty waiting for any man with the energy to go. The slow and cautious Nils was fired, and, when argument failed to rouse Brigitta, he sold the accumulations of a laborious life without her knowledge, bought tickets to Minnesota for them and their only surviving child, a five-year-old boy, and returned to his impoverished home to tell her that a new and better life was beginning for them all. Brigitta shed tears of anguish, but she hid them from Nils. In dull acquiescence she packed her household goods, said good-bye forever to the little mounds on the hillside, and followed her husband on the long journey to the unknown.

In mid-ocean, in the crowded steerage, a little girl was born to her. Whether thanks to malignant fate or to the

awkward ministrations of a member of the ship's crew who had medical pretensions, the child was, from birth, partially paralyzed on the left side. She was able to walk only after years of determined struggle on her part and her mother's, and her invalidism was a heavy burden to her family in the early days of its battle with an alien and exacting environment.

When Matts was eighteen they left their first abiding place in America and came to take up land in this northern country, prepared to hew a home out of the stubborn forest. That was five years ago, but Matts could still remember the ache in his back through the long weeks of unceasing labor after their arrival. The family lived in a rough shelter of boughs during the first months in the new country while they were felling the trees, heaping the brush in miniature mountains for burning, and getting logs ready for building the cabin in which they were to live. Brigitta had worked beside her husband and son, piling the brush and burning it, while they raised the walls of the new home. It was slow and heavy work. They yoked their ox and cow together to drag the wood to the clearing where the house and barn were to stand, but there was only the strength of Matts and his father to lift the big, unwieldy logs into place.

Thirteen-year-old Olga cooked their meals over an open fire, and such washing of clothes as was done she did in the little brook which ran through the place. After her mother had burned the brush on the cut-over land as well as she could, Olga hobbled after her, dropping pieces of potato in the holes which Brigitta dug with a hoe between the tree stumps. They trod the earth firm over the plantings, the fine ashes from the burning blackening their ankles as they walked. The corn they planted in the same way. When they were through, they tied flapping rags to branches stuck in the ground to keep hovering crows from

searching in the newly broken soil for their favorite food.

Brigitta's melancholy, which grew deeper at each move from a place become familiar, lightened after the seed was in the ground. Some primitive instinct within, which bade the woman prepare against an uncertain future, seemed to be satisfied, and in the days that followed the first sprouting of the seeds her look was happier and her step more eager than it had been for many months.

Through the summer the plantings had been left pretty much to care for themselves. In the rich loam with light layers of fertilizing ashes on top, the potatoes and corn had at least as good a chance as the weeds, and they grew vigorous and luxuriant. When the crops were gathered that first fall, the attic of the cabin was crammed with yellow ears of corn, and the root cellar which Matts had dug near the cabin door was filled to overflowing with big pinkish-brown potatoes. As bag after bag was brought in from the clearing, Brigitta watched the potatoes roll down into the deep hole with the certainty that, whatever else might happen, her family would not starve in the long winter ahead. She felt sure that there would even be a surplus to share with the Lindbloms, who had come with them from the south to take an adjoining hundred acres, but who had many more mouths to feed than they.

Part of the first winter, after the snow had come, Matts and the oldest Lindblom boy, their oxen yoked together, spent hauling logs to the mill ten miles down the river and carrying back rough sawed boards to make floors for their cabins in place of the trodden earth. After the floors were laid, they banked dirt and sod around the base of the cabins and stuffed the cracks between the logs of the walls with mud and grass. When an extra door and shutters for the window openings were finally made, the families were safe from the worst perils and discomforts of the bitter weather.

The ox and the cow of the Swensons were only partially protected from the cold by a low log wall and a brush roof, but before the winter was over Nils had built a small barn. In February he hauled up from the river bottom the wild hay which Matts had cut in the late summer and stacked in a sheltered place ready to be brought to the clearing when the barn was done.

When the cold weather had finally settled down to stay and the snow was firm on the road, Matts and the Lindblom boy had taken their oxen and a sled of heavy boards and ridden the long fifty miles to the south to fetch the household goods of the two families, which they had not been able to bring with them when they first came. Matts remembered that trip with joy — the gently rolling, wooded country with little frozen lakes in the hollows, visible for a moment and lost again, the wide level stretches south of New Sweden running out to the rim of the distant horizon, and over all the great inverted bowl of the heavens. Though human habitations were few, the world to his observant eye was full of life. He kept drawing August Lindblom's attention to the tracks of birds and rabbits, to the vanishing tail of a fox, or to the caw of a wintering crow. August listened good humoredly to his eager talk. He liked to trap rabbits for their meat and he hoped some day to shoot a deer, but he was in the habit of taking the world as he found it and Matts's constant surprise and interest in what he saw about him never ceased to seem strange.

Matts had not, however, been accustomed to much response to his enthusiasms; as long as August was willing to listen, he asked nothing better than to be allowed to pour out his ideas and observations in a flood of joyous conversation. He would jump off the slow-moving sled and study unfamiliar tracks beside the road, describing to August with a twinkle in his eye the strange beasts of the

earth or birds of the air that left such imprints on the snow. August later repeated these tales to the boys of the neighborhood, and it became common talk among them that the country south of New Sweden was full of creatures unknown in the woods about home.

When the boys started back, the sled was piled high with feather beds and bedding, copper pots and kettles, all brought from Sweden years before. The crowning glory of the load was an American cookstove which Matts had bought to adorn the new cabin with its ugly, practical presence. The boys saw nothing but beauty in it and protected its clumsy body, dismembered, for the long carry, from possible injury by wedging the best of the bedding about it. The glowing copper utensils with their graceful shapes and fine curves might meanwhile bang and rattle as they would.

The return trip seemed long and tedious to the boys. A steady cold wind from the north blew in their faces as they trudged along beside the heavily laden sled, and their feet in wooden shoes felt numb in spite of thick woolen socks and dry grass packed close about them. Even Matts's bright enthusiasm seemed chilled by the bleak, windy weather, overcast and threatening, which drove all living creatures into shelter. But when the sled finally reached the Swenson cabin and the two boys, with Nils's help, had set up the stove and kindled a fire in its black depths, Matts smiled again, certain that no cosier or pleasanter place could be found than the little log hut on the edge of the clearing.

He was thinking of all these things as the oxen pulled steadily along the drifted road. The five years had brought great changes to the wilderness in which the scattered pioneers had been lost in those first lonely months. He was passing cleared fields and wide openings where not long since the forest had shown a solid front. Lining the side

roads he knew there were other clearings hidden from his sight by interrupting groups of trees. It was a good country in which to grow up, for every man had his part in making it better. If five years had so improved it, what might not the next twenty-five accomplish? The community already had its store, its school, its church. There was even vague talk of the railroad building a branch line to their town in the near future.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of an axe, and as he drew nearer he saw a tree just ahead of him in the woods to his left, some distance back from the road, crash to the ground.

"Someone 's started clearing for the Jensens," he said to himself. Then he added, ruefully, "Now they 'll find the bees in the big tree and I 'll have to look somewhere else for my honey."

He could see that a line of trees had been cut, running in from the road. The cutting had cleared a track wide enough to admit a team of oxen. At the end of the trail two men were chopping vigorously, felling the closely set trees. Matts stopped his oxen to watch them for a few minutes, making mental calculations as to the chance of their including the bee tree in their general destruction of the hindering forest.

One of the men, looking up from his work, caught sight of Matts and signaled to him to wait. He hurried through the trees toward the sled, carrying an axe in his hand. Matts saw that it was Olaf Jensen, come to clear his new land. He remembered him as a distant neighbor before they had moved to the north. Jensen did not recognize in the muffled man at the oxen's head the yellow-haired boy he had known, and he spoke to him as to a stranger.

"Are you coming back this way from Burghardt's store?" he asked, and when Matts nodded, he added, "My axe is dull. Will you get Burghardt to grind it for me and

bring it back when you come? I can work here dragging logs while you are gone."

"I 'm Nils Swenson's son," said Matts, as he took the axe. "We live about seven miles north of here. Father knew you were coming."

"So you 're Matts Swenson!" exclaimed Jensen, looking at him intently. "You 've grown to be a big fellow. Say, do you suppose you could help me get my logs together? Ask your father to let you work for me for a few weeks. When he needs an extra man or a team of oxen sometime, I 'll help him. I 've got a fine pair of oxen."

He pointed with pride to the large, ruddy steers standing in the woods, and went on: "Burghardt's nephew Karl is working with me to-day. To-morrow he 's going up north to work in the lumber camp in the big timber. He 's trying to get money enough to buy some new clothes. He wants all the girls to be in love with him." Olaf winked significantly at Matts as he spoke.

Matts looked toward Karl, chopping in the distance, with an expression which Olaf thought was envy.

"I guess they admire a handsome fellow like you more," said Olaf, flatteringly.

"The girls know what they want," laughed Matts, his face clearing, "and it 's not a stupid like me."

"Then they are the fools," said Olaf. "But look here, Matts, you tell your father I want to get my family here early enough in the spring so they can do my planting for me. The children are too young to live in the snow, so I 've got to put up a cabin before I go for them. If you help me, it won't take long. I can tell to look at you you 're a smart worker."

Matts answered without enthusiasm, "I 'll let you know in a few days." As his oxen got slowly under way, he watched the little, sharp-faced man, hurrying back to the line of felled trees, with a faint stir of dislike. He remem-

bered Jensen as a rather dull man but a tremendous worker, who drove others as hard as he drove himself. He pitied the children who would have to do the planting for him, and hoped in his heart that his own father would not consent to let him go. Matts preferred to work at a pace that left him free to watch the stirring world about him and to follow the thoughts it suggested, but he suspected that Olaf was a man whose only interest was in getting the job done. He remembered his father once saying that Jensen had never learned to read or write. The printed word must be without meaning to him. What could fill such a man's life except the stupidity of hard labor?

Matts had had a few months' schooling in three different winters and had quickly learned to read. From that moment a new world had opened to him. He had grasped at every book or paper which was available in his community. He had begged and borrowed from everyone who had anything to read. The supply was meagre and the range of subjects very limited. School readers and controversial theological discussions did not supply rich nutriment to an opening mind, and tracts, almanacs, and patent-medicine folders were not very satisfying to an eager student of the wonders of nature, but Matts read enough to realize that there were men who had noticed what he noticed, had cared for the things for which he cared, and who had even put their observations in printed books. It was seldom that any fragments of their writings came his way, but occasionally he found a sentence or a paragraph whose reading gave him a warm feeling of having for a brief moment spoken with a friend who understood. He never met such people in the flesh, and he had learned, except for his infrequent outpourings to the half-attentive August, to keep his enthusiasms to himself.

The only books in the farms about New Sweden were ponderous copies of the Bible, but Nils, in a yielding mo-

ment, had been persuaded by an itinerant agent to buy a Swedish weekly paper. Matts, through the same enterprising salesman, had subscribed to the *American Farmer's Journal,* paying for it with money earned in log-driving on a neighboring river. He read and reread each number with an attention not often given to such mediocrity. An obscure notice of a book concerned with the life of earthworms, written by a man named Darwin, had brought him extraordinary happiness. He was amazed and delighted that the habits of such humble creatures, an unending source of interest to himself, had been thought worthy to occupy the time of a man great enough to publish a book. He studied the ways of the earthworms round the barn after that with a fresh zest, and watched eagerly for further mention of tastes so like his own.

Paragraphs here and there, describing the different kinds of bees and their strangely organized life, had so inspired him with the desire to know more about them that he had tried to capture a swarm of wild bees and bring them near home where he could watch them from day to day. He was generously stung in the attempt but he did not succeed in making them captive. Never after that, however, did he mow a field of hay without observing the flight of the buzzing, pollen-laden honey-seekers nor cut a tree in the woods without being alert for the possible presence of a hive in a hollow in the trunk.

The agricultural papers always spoke of ants as a pest and only related as much of their habits as was concerned with the best methods of getting rid of them, but Matts found the tedious hoeing of long rows of corn enlivened by the frantic activities of the little creatures in the rounded hills which were opened by his hoe. Many an hour, while his father wondered why the cultivation of the corn took so much valuable time, he spent bending over the heaped-up funnels of earth, lifting off the different

layers and studying the workings of the communal life.

These thoughts and memories were in Matts's mind as the oxen drew nearer to the tiny town. The land surrounding the scattered buildings that bore the name of New Sweden was entirely cleared of trees and lay bare and denuded in the bright sun. The stiff steeple of the Lutheran church which stood beside the road was the highest point in a wide circuit of flat country. Across the sled tracks that ran in front of the church was the single store, its high entrance platform and false front still bearing the raw look of recently sawed wood. Back of the building were rough, open-faced sheds sheltering farm machinery, wagons, kegs of nails, yokes for oxen, and all the other larger commodities for sale in a store in a newly opened farming country.

A rickety stair on the outside of the building led to two rooms above, where the Burghardt family lived. As the loaded sled drew near, a small boy who was sliding down the icy steps on a barrel stave suddenly appeared, almost under the feet of the oxen, and so startled them that they snorted with fear. The child picked himself up from the ground, paying no heed to the great beasts, and ran shouting joyously toward Matts who was climbing down from his seat. The tall man snatched up the little boy and tossed him in the air.

"What shall I do to a boy who frightens my oxen?" he cried. "Shall I throw him up to the moon?" At the child's rapturous word of assent he laughed and tossed him once more into the air. Then, standing him on the ground, he said, "You run in and ask your father where he wants this wood put, and I 'll let you help me unload."

The child scrambled to the platform and went through the front door. As the boy disappeared the oxen stood quiet, reassured, and waited patiently with lowered heads for the next word of command. Matts took out the box

containing the eggs, with the hay and covering sacks still about them, and set it on the floor of the porch with Olaf's axe laid beside it. Then he walked up the runway, fitted with narrow wooden cleats, which led to the platform, and, picking up the box and the axe, followed the child into the building.

Burghardt was sitting in a high-backed armchair by the stove which stood in the centre of the room. He always wore an old cap and coat at his work to save himself the bother of putting them on when he had to go to the room back of the store or into the sheds in the yard to get supplies for his customers. He was a slovenly, bearded German, who could speak enough Swedish to deal with the settlers of that nationality who were moving into the country and enough English to perform the duties of postmaster, real-estate agent, registrar of deeds, and general intermediary between the old and new Americans in his part of the state. His expression, in so far as it was visible behind his enveloping beard, was guileless, but he was a sharp business man and drove a hard bargain. Most of the immigrants were at some disadvantage in their dealings with him, but his hearty manner and a guarded kindliness, which he indulged when its indulgence cost him nothing, went far to offset the effect of his crooked methods in the minds of his perplexed and helplessly trusting customers.

He liked Matts and was flattered by the young fellow's interest in everything in the store and by his evident admiration for a man who could express himself in three languages. This did not prevent him from being as ready to get the best of him at a bargain as of anyone else.

When Matts came in, stamping the snow from his heavy shoes, Burghardt had started to tell the little boy where the load of wood was to be put. Matts walked past the grille

and wooden letter-case of the post office, which was near the door, and, with a cheery word of greeting to the storekeeper, laid the axe and box on the wide counter farther down the side. Burghardt got up with a grunt of reply and stepped behind the counter. He counted out the eggs into a basket. Though in his numbering he passed over a few with almost invisible cracks, he made no move to return the discarded ones to Matts.

"Fifteen dozen," he said, entering the total in a dingy account book.

Matts shrugged his shoulders. He thought to himself, "Mother said there were sixteen dozen, but I suppose it will have to go at that."

"What 's the axe for?" asked Burghardt as he pushed the empty box toward Matts and his eye fell on the helve.

Matts, warming his hands at the stove, explained.

"All right," said Burghardt. "The grindstone is in the back room. Georg here will turn it for me after I show you where to put the wood."

He and the child went through the back room and out the side door, leaving the axe by the straddling grindstone which stood in a corner near the window. Matts put his mittens on again and opened the front door. The oxen were still standing as he had left them, immobile as statues. When he jumped down beside them and gave them the word, they threw their great shoulders into the yoke and jerked the runners out of the grooves into which they were settling. As they turned the corner of the building toward the dark-faced shelters which edged the yard behind, the sled slid squeakily over the hard, unbroken crust of a recent freezing.

Burghardt was standing by the shed waiting for him. He motioned Matts to pile up the wood in one of the sections where a sawhorse and a chopping block showed the

uses to which it was put. Then he returned to the sharpening of the axe, followed reluctantly by Georg, who cast longing looks in Matts's direction until the door closed behind him.

While Matts was stacking the wood swiftly and without waste motions, he could hear through the loose-fitting window the soft whirr of the turning stone as the edge of the axe was ground down. When the sound ceased, Georg came running out to the woodshed and, while he watched Matts finish the unloading, plied him with questions about the strange creatures that lived at the Swenson farm. Matts told him of wasps that made paper and birds that danced and sticks that walked until the child could hardly take a breath in his excitement.

When the last log was tossed on the pile, Matts asked his little auditor, "Would you like to feed the oxen?" At Georg's eager assent he helped him take the hay, which had been under the logs on the sled, and throw it on the ground within reach of the animals. He made him watch to see how the cattle bent over to say grace before they ate, just like the best Lutherans in New Sweden. Then they went back to the store.

Matts found Burghardt with some books in his arms.

"You are always asking me the German names of things," he said. "I thought maybe you 'd like to learn German the way I learned English. These are the books I studied. You can read them the other way around and learn German. When you know how, I 'll let you have my German paper to read."

Matts held out his hands for the books, his face shining. They were nothing but poorly written schoolbooks, but to the shut-in mind of Matts they seemed like gates which would reveal a new world. He sat down, forgetful of everything about him, turning over the pages as a miser might count his gold. Burghardt watched him with the

gratified smile of one who has given without loss to himself.

"The old woman" — he pointed a thumb to the ceiling — "got some papers the other day from her folks in Germany. Next time you come, I 'll let you have those."

Matts assented, only half hearing what was said. Burghardt stepped behind the post-office grille.

"Here 's your paper and your father's. They came yesterday."

Matts got up and took the Swedish and English weeklies from Burghardt's extended hand. He sat down again and, opening them, began to read. Georg, disappointed at losing the attention of his story-telling companion, went back to his sliding, and Burghardt, bending over an account book, added columns of figures, wetting his pencil now and then and wrinkling his forehead in his effort to get the totals correct.

For an hour not a word was said and no sound except the occasional turning of pages was heard. Once Burghardt got up and put a fresh stick of wood in the stove, but not even the slamming of the iron door could rouse Matts from his absorption. Burghardt finished the columns to his satisfaction and, after watching Matts for a few minutes, observed, "Say, Matts, what do you suppose Jensen is doing all this time without his axe? Had n't you better start before the oxen freeze to the ground?"

Matts started up with a dazed look, as though bewildered at finding himself in the store.

"Is it late?" he asked, taking his cap from the floor beside his chair and pulling it over his head. He got to his feet with the books and papers in his arms and went toward the door with the uncertain step of the newly awakened.

"Did n't your mother want you to bring home some-

thing from the store?" asked Burghardt, who was watching him with a smile half hidden in his beard.

Matts laughed, and his bewildered look cleared.

"I certainly am a stupid," he said, coming back to the counter, "but when I get a book I 'm like a crazy man. I don't know where I am half the time, and I 'm never where anyone wants me to be. Mother asked me to get two pounds of coffee and a pound of sugar with the egg money. Half the money from the wood is mine and I want to use it to get some red oil for the lamp. They never let me have enough candles to read by, so I cut wood and now I 'm going to buy my own oil. If I have a light, I don't have to waste the whole night sleeping as the rest of them do."

Burghardt thought of a family having such a queer member with a faint stir of sympathy, but he filled the can Matts brought in without comment. Matts watched the red fluid, which made for safe burning in the early days of kerosene, pour out of the big barrel until the can was full. He had pictured this moment through long hours of chopping in the snowy woods, and when he went out he carried the can as tenderly as he did the books and papers under his arm.

When his few purchases were stowed on the empty sled, he invited Georg, who was still sliding, to a seat beside him and told him he might ride as far as the blacksmith's. As they drew near the smithy they could hear the clink of the hammer on the anvil and see a broken farm implement by the forge, brought to be repaired. The rough shed, with its smoke-blackened interior and its outer fringe of wheels and sled runners, shafts, kegs, and discarded horseshoes, had an air of age and of being a natural part of the landscape, which was denied to the garish yellow church and the false-fronted store.

Matts stopped his oxen and looked in through the half-opened door. The blacksmith was just returning to the

forge the glowing metal which he had hammered until it darkened. He started pulling the bellows with his grimy, powerful arm on which the muscles stood out as though modeled in ebony. With the back of his free hand he brushed the sweat from his forehead. In spite of the wintry weather outside, the big drops formed and ran into his eyes, half blinding him as he bent over the blaze.

He did not look up as Matts set the child on the snow, but laid the metal on the anvil again, absorbed in moulding the stubborn element to some shape which existed in his mind clear-cut and complete. Matts stood watching him a few minutes as Georg obediently started homeward. He knew by experience what it was to lose consciousness of the outer world in the presence of an idea, and he looked with a new sympathy at the man whose reddish hair shone in the light from the darting flames of the forge. But the oxen, impatient to return to food and warm stalls, started forward without waiting for the signal. Matts made no effort to stop them; he let them have their way down the road toward the dark patch of forest, whence still came the sounds of chopping and of falling trees.

## CHAPTER II

When Matts reached home, the early winter dusk had already fallen. The shutters over the two openings in the log walls were not yet closed, and he could see clearly the moth-like glow of the candle in the cabin, sending its rays out into the night. He unfastened the sled and left it in the yard. When he opened the barn door, the oxen stepped into the dark little building as though in haste to find shelter once more. Matts followed them inside and with his heavy shoe broke the crust of ice in the wooden trough by the door so that they might drink the still unfrozen water in the bottom. When the animals had had their fill, he tied them in their stalls, groping in the half light for the chains.

Two little calves had struggled to their feet when the door opened, and they held up their soft heads to be petted. Matts pulled down a heavy bag hanging from the rafters and took from it some crystals of rock salt which he fed to them. They licked his fingers eagerly with their rough tongues, and tried to follow him as he brought armfuls of hay from the stack outside and threw them in front of the hungry oxen. When he had finished, he pushed the crowding creatures gently back and went out, closing the door behind him. Outside he lifted a log which was leaning on the wall of the barn, and propped it against the door to hold it securely.

He stood quietly a few moments, looking at the emerging stars and listening. He could hear the noise of movements in the house and, far off, he thought he heard the bark of a fox. Except for these sounds the world was still.

As he lingered in the trampled snow of the barnyard, Matts had one of those moments of unreasoning joy in life that come at times to us all, filled with a sense of warmth and glow at being a partaker in the great experience. The delicious unknown awaited him. Perhaps tonight, in the treasures of reading in the papers still lying on the sled, would be revealed some fresh reason for being glad he was alive.

He picked up his bundles and ran into the house. He stopped just inside the door a moment, stamping the snow from his feet and laughing greetings to the people in the room. No one looked up to answer his merry words, but his mother called sharply, as she felt the cold air rush in and threaten to engulf the room, "Shut the door quickly!"

Matts hastily closed the door, dropping some of his bundles as he did so, and leaned against it as if to assure its staying closed until the room warmed again to its original heat. His mother was bending over the stove, stirring something she was cooking. His father sat with stockinged feet in the open oven, drying and warming them. His wooden shoes were under the stove. Olga was seated on a stool beside a heavy plank table, mending a man's coat by the light of a tallow candle. Her withered left hand held the garment awkwardly, but she sewed rapidly and skillfully with her right. A new energy and radiance seemed to come into the room with Matts. They were all instantly conscious of it though they said nothing.

"Here 's your sugar and coffee, Mother," said Matts, gayly, walking toward her, "though I can't say you can thank me for remembering to get them. Burghardt knows I have n't any head, so when I started to go he reminded me of my errands." He handed the bundles to Brigitta. She accepted them without comment and put them carefully away on a shelf behind the stove.

"And look here," went on Matts, holding his books out

with an air of triumph; "Burghardt has given me these."

Nils sat up suddenly and pulled his feet out of the oven.

"More excuse for not working, I suppose," he said, sharply, setting his feet square on the floor. "Books are foolishness. Did you sell the wood?"

Matts was undisturbed.

"Yes," he answered. "I sold the wood and bought some oil for Olga, so she can sew without going blind. I left it on the sled."

He ran out to get it, — not forgetting to close the door, — as if glad to escape remarks just then, and came back in a moment with the can in his hand. He took down a glass lamp from the shelf over the door and filled it with oil. Then he lighted it and placed it on the table at Olga's side. She blew out her candle and went on sewing by the brighter light, saying slyly, as she did so, "I don't think you got the oil all for my mending."

"Oh, now, Olga," reproached Matts with a merry smile, "what a thing to say after all the wood I cut to save your eyes! Of course, if you want me to, I 'll use a little of the oil to read by — but only a little."

Olga laughed.

"I 'll let you use some now and then," she said.

Matts hung his coat and hat on a peg in the wall.

"I saw Olaf Jensen," he said to his father as he went back to the table. "He 's started cutting the trees on his place to build his cabin. Karl Burghardt is working with him, but Karl is going to the big woods to work to-morrow and Olaf wants me to come and help him for a few weeks. He told me to tell you that when you need an extra man sometime he 'll help you out if you 'll let me go now."

Nils grunted.

"Olaf Jensen 's always too busy to help anybody but himself," he said, shortly. "I wanted you to begin to-morrow cutting wood for the new chicken house." Then he

added, grudgingly, "You might help him for a week, I suppose. One thing, you can't read all the time if you work for Jensen. He 's a driver."

Matts only half heard what Nils said, for he had spread his farmer's paper on the table in front of him and had begun to read.

"Where 's Mrs. Jensen?" asked Brigitta as she put corn bread, honey, and butter on the table for Matts to eat. The rest had finished their supper before he came. Matts answered his mother's question with one eye on the paper. He ate and talked and read in turn.

"Here 's your Swedish weekly, father," said Olga, catching sight of it under the books which Matts had laid beside his plate. She pulled it out and handed the sheet to Nils. He took a seat on the bench near the light and painfully spelled out a few sentences, but he soon had enough. He put the paper back on the table and got ready for bed.

Brigitta cleared the table after Matts had finished eating, and washed the dishes in a pan of the snow water which always stood at the back of the stove. When she was through, she emptied the dishwater into the big slop-pail which would be carried out to the pigs in the morning. Brigitta was very neat in her ways. Her stove was always shining and her cabin floor scoured. The log walls were too rough for scrubbing, but the spreads on the three beds in the corners of the room were white and smooth, and the copper pots hanging from the beams threw back brilliant reflections of the lamplight. When she saw her husband pulling off his outer clothing she took the white cover from the double bed, folded it, and hung it over a peeled sapling which Matts had fastened close to the ceiling for that purpose. Nils crawled in between the blankets in his underflannels and was soon fast asleep. In her rapid, tidy way Brigitta arranged the room for the night, and then went to bed herself, with a final caution to

Matts about putting the lamp on the high shelf when he was through using it.

Under the clear light Olga bent over her work, sewing steadily. Her flaxen hair was combed straight back from her forehead and fastened in a braided coil at her neck. Her face was delicate and refined, but it had the restless, dissatisfied expression so often seen in young cripples. Once or twice she sat up, erect, looking straight in front of her at nothing. Then with an unconscious sigh, hardly more than a long breath, she would settle back to her work. When the patch was finished she put her sewing materials in a birch-bark basket of home manufacture and hung the mended coat by the door. She lifted the cover of the stove and put in another stick from the pile beside it. Matts neither saw nor heard.

"That will keep you warm for another hour," she said as she replaced the cover.

Matts looked up with a word of thanks and was instantly lost to his surroundings again. Olga sighed softly and limped back to the table. She picked up one of the German books, turned the pages idly for a few minutes, wondering at the unfamiliar words, and then laid it down again. She still lingered, making a few remarks to Matts which he absently answered. Then she undressed and went to her own bed in the bunk in the corner of the room.

Matts had the world to himself. The dark walls of the cabin absorbed the light of the lamp and left him the centre of a small, glowing circle. Outside the wind blew steadily. It was not strong enough to shake the heavy cabin, but it rattled the shutters and drove the snow against the north-facing walls. On the floor of the attic above, Matts could hear the corn roll under the stealthy tread of the cat as she searched for mice in the grain bins. There was no other sound save the rustle of the paper in his hands and the quiet breathing of the sleepers.

Undisturbed by the light in the room, they slept, physically spent by the labor of the day.

Matts held the paper pushed up under the base of the lamp. A tiny circle of red, where the light filtered through the glass reservoir of oil, illuminated what he was reading. As the fire burned low, he shivered a little with the increasing cold, but he made no move to put on more wood. His eye had fallen upon a brief item in the *American Farmer's Journal,* slipped in between a discussion of the fattening of hogs and a description of the best type of root cellar. The paragraph was entitled, "Variation and Selection," and was quoted from the same Darwin whom Matts already knew as a student of earthworms.

From a remote period in all parts of the world man has subjected many animals and plants to domestication or culture. Man has no power of altering the absolute conditions of life; he cannot change the climate of any country; he adds no new element to the soil; but he can remove an animal or a plant from one soil or climate to another, and give it food on which it did not subsist in its natural state. He can cross and interbreed, and he can select the individuals which shall carry on the strain. If organic beings had not possessed an inherent tendency to vary, man could have done nothing. He exposes his animals and plants to various conditions of life, and variability supervenes, which he cannot even prevent or check. Man selects varying individuals, sows their seeds, and again selects their varying offspring. Man may be said to have been trying an experiment on a gigantic scale; and it is an experiment which nature during the long lapse of time has incessantly tried.

Matts read and reread the words. Then he let the paper slip from his hands. So that was what lay back of the tiny changes he had noticed taking place from year to year in the seed sown in different fields! The little variations

were not just accidents that happened on Nils Swenson's farm in New Sweden. They were part of a great change in the whole of nature, a response on the part of growing things the world over to the influences about them. The Chinaman in his rice fields on the Yangtse River and the Russian on the steppes of Siberia could observe it as well as he. Was nothing then finished? Must everything change to keep a foothold in a changing world?

Plants, like men, must have wandered over the face of the globe and have adjusted themselves by taking on new ways and developing new powers as men had been forced to do. Unless the cabbage could resist the early frost, it would not survive in this northern country. Only the corn whose leaves did not wither and dry under the hot mid-summer sun could produce ears to fill the attic bins of the settlers. The weaklings would perish and leave no trace. The selection for survival or destruction was dependent on the capacity for adaptation that lay within the seed itself. Nature merely stood by to execute the sentence.

But was there no part that man could take in the blind struggle toward adjustment? He picked up the paper again and slipped it into the narrow circle of red under the lamp.

Man does not attempt to cause variability, though he unintentionally effects this by exposing organisms to new conditions of life, and by crossing breeds already formed. But variability being granted, he works wonders. Unless some degree of selection be exercised, the free commingling of the individuals of the same variety soon obliterates the slight differences which arise.

Selection constantly repeated will accumulate differences and superiorities till they are manifest to the eyes of every beholder. A new character is at first faintly pronounced and is not strongly inherited; and then the full difficulty of selection is experienced. Indomitable patience, the finest

powers of discrimination, and sound judgment must be exercised during many years. If any of these qualities be wanting, the labor of a lifetime may be thrown away.

Matts drew a long breath. What a chance for man to use this great gift of variability in nature to fill the earth with the best of living things! He remembered with a feeling of new understanding a stalk of beardless wheat which he had noticed the summer before when he was mowing the grain in the west field. It was bigger and heavier than any wheat he had ever seen before. He wondered whether a chance seed had come in a grain bag, or whether some power had been stirring in a common seed to make it bear like that. He was glad he had cut the head and put it safely on a beam in the barn. He had meant to show it to August as a sample of the wheat the Swensons grew, but in the rush of harvesting he had forgotten all about it. There it was now, above the drowsing cattle, ready to have him try out on its planted seeds the magic of selection.

The narrow walls of the little cabin seemed to part and let Matts's eye of imagination look out upon endless miles of prairie growing only such rich-bearing wheat, and upon grain elevators filled to overflowing with golden kernels to feed a world of hungry men.

"An experiment on a gigantic scale" indeed, and performed on the tiny grain, so hard to the touch and so sensitive to the mysterious inner pressure to variation. Matts felt a thrill through his whole being. He need no longer be forced to get his joy in life from passively watching a world of happenings in which he had no part.

He remembered reading years before in some schoolbook the story of the wheat. He could see now as then with the inner eye that remote mountain in Syria where grew the wild grass destined to be carried round the globe, and to become, through changes wrought by its subtle response

to the stimulus of different soils and climates, the master cereal of civilization. The seed he had hidden in the barn had so altered through the centuries that he knew only the expert could have recognized in the desert grass of that arid region in western Asia the parent of all wheat. Had that process of alteration come to an end? Minnesota was a new country, just wrested from the forest, or having the sod of the prairie turned for the first time, but already it was showing promise of being a great wheat-producing state. Could one be sure that the grass which had left Mount Hermon thousands of years before to begin its wanderings over the earth had adjusted itself to the needs of this northern land? Certainly it had not so far done very well on the farms around New Sweden. Matts thought of the thin wheat his neighbors grew, and compared it with the single heavy head he had chanced upon. Why might it not be possible for every stalk to be as superbly weighted as that?

To Matts's eager enthusiasm spring could not come too soon. He would plant the precious kernels in the spring and again in the fall, and see which planting yielded him the richest returns. He would plant in wet places and in dry; he would see how they resisted the wind and the hail, and when the grain was ripe he would select only the best for the next year's experiment, trusting the tide of change within the living plant to give him in time the perfect seed.

Matts's mind was a tumult of questions to which he could find no answer. Were there forces in the animal world like those in the plants, which would never let one generation be exactly like the one before? Were the cattle and the chickens changing like the wheat? Was man himself an unstable creature? If the time should ever come when he could control his variations, would he be able to bring into being a race of perfect men?

Matts stared, unseeing, at the shadowed wall in front of

him. If the power lay within his hands to alter the seemingly inflexible world about him even by so much as increasing the size of a kernel of wheat, life was a bigger experience than he had ever imagined it could be. He who had lived from day to day, enjoying the casual happiness of a contented nature, sat erect on the rude bench in the rapidly chilling cabin, impatient for the morrow, impatient for the day after that, impatient for the time to come when the great experiment could be begun.

The lamp suddenly flickered and went out. Matts, startled, tried confusedly to remember where he was. The cat had come down from the attic through an opening in the boards, and she rubbed against Matts's leg in the dark, purring gently. He groped for her and, lifting her to his lap, stroked her soft fur.

The spell of the strange universe in which his thoughts had been wandering was still upon him. To-morrow — perhaps it was already to-morrow — he was to work for Olaf Jensen, who was a hard taskmaster. His dreams of the great experiment must wait. But there were many to-morrows, and some of them he would take for his own. Even those that belonged to Olaf would not be wholly lost. The domineering little man might drive his hands, but he could not control his thoughts. Perhaps even Olaf's mind roamed when he seemed to be thinking of nothing but felling the next tree. What dark, primitive thoughts did Olaf think?

Matts wondered if the brains of men were as sensitive to the changes about them as the Syrian grass had been to its surroundings through the centuries. He knew the neighbors thought him queer. Was his queerness a variation in man, working for good or ill, of a kind with those that make for strength or weakness in the plant world? He felt himself reaching out to ideas and interests foreign to those with whom his life was spent. Was such a differ-

ence in a human mind selected for survival by nature or rejected as of little worth? He pondered on the problem as to whether a state like Minnesota needed such men as he, or whether they would in the end be pushed aside for the Jensens and Lindbloms of the strong backs and unresting energy.

He put down the cat and stood up. His shoes made a noise on the floor; he quietly slipped them off, undressed, and tiptoed to his bed. The ashes in the stove had paled to gray and the room was very cold. He lay down, shivering a little, and pulled the covers over his shoulders. The cat jumped up beside him and after a few cautious tries finally settled down at his feet in a round, warm ball. He turned to face the wall, moving carefully so as not to disturb her, and in a few moments had dropped into the dreamless sleep of healthy youth.

## CHAPTER III

MATTS worked with Jensen through some of the coldest weeks in the winter. The rough, one-room log house had been sufficiently completed in February to allow Jensen to go for his family. Matts's father had taken his ox team and gone with Olaf to help him bring back the family and the furniture. Matts was left to do a few last things: to fill the cracks between the logs with straw, to make the door for the single opening, and to bank the base of the house against the creeping cold.

As silence fell upon the little clearing which had resounded for weeks with the blows of the axe and the fall of trees, the wild creatures, whom even a Minnesota winter could not drive away, came venturing back to their haunts. Matts, packing the straw into crevices, heard the bold call of a blue jay which flew out of a near-by tree, and caught occasional glimpses of rabbits running across the snow from one clump of sheltering undergrowth to another. He stopped work when he heard little stirrings about him, and waited, as motionless as the logs at his back, to catch sight of an inquisitive squirrel or weasel, or to see some rummaging bird who had risked the unaccustomed Northern winter, searching for food in the brush.

Fortunately for the completion of the calking process, the cold was too great to tempt wintering creatures to wander long at a time from their retreats. Matts crowded the straw into the cracks and cemented it with dirt, which he thawed under a pile of burning brush and moistened with the melting snow at the fire's edge. The hole for the

stovepipe he cased also in mud mixed with straw. He could not make the opening very smooth, for the mixture froze and cracked after he rammed it into place. Round the base of the house he piled manure and dead leaves, and he laid branches on top to hold the loose material in place. He made a door of rough boards and hung it with hinges cut from strips of old leather. Close to the house he stacked wood of stove length, chopped and ready for use.

Matts worked late the night before Olaf was expected to return, burning the last of the brush. The little clearing, with its circle of dark trees, was like a giant cauldron filled with flame. The snow, roughened by the dragging of the brush across its surface, showed pink in the light of the burning, and the cabin brightened and darkened in the rising and falling of the wavering flames. Matts moved back and forth, bent like a gnome under great burdens of branches or standing upright like a ministering priest at the altar, tossing the brush into the blaze. His strong lithe figure was silhouetted against the flames one moment and the next blotted out as he went back into the dark circle that rimmed the fire to bring a fresh load for the burning.

Not until the last of the brush had been consumed and the fire had died down to a bed of glowing coals was he conscious of the hour. The full moon, all unnoted in the glare, had crept to the zenith of the sky, and he knew that it must be close to the middle of the night. He stood a few moments, his eyes on the tiny, flickering flames among the embers, drawing deep breaths as does one who has battled victoriously with mighty forces. He lingered a little, loath to turn from the brightness and warmth.

When he started on his long walk home, the rough, frozen road and the snow-covered fields, luminous in the moonlight, seemed to him suddenly flat and uninteresting. Winter, the death of the world, brought him no thrill.

Fire and warmth, the spring renewal of life in the soil, the growth and change of living things, were the forces which stirred his imagination. As he walked through the crystal beauty of the winter night, a hard day of toil behind him and another ahead, the young man, hardly more than a boy, turned over in his mind the great problems with which man has wrestled since the Creation. He hugged to himself the thought that the strange impulse which adapted the different forms of life to each other, and fitted them into the world of rocks and water, of heat and cold, was his to play with. He could help along the changes, be himself a creator, and bring finer and more beautiful things into existence. The long walk seemed short in the company of such dreams, and the future radiant with the prospect of such miracles accompanying the drudgery of every day.

It was late the following afternoon when Matts, working again at the Jensen clearing, caught sight of the two ox teams far down the road and saw them stop in front of Burghardt's store. Two men, whom he thought he recognized as his father and Jensen, walking beside the oxen, disappeared into the building. The two sleds seemed to spill little figures into the snow on every side as soon as they stopped; they were so bundled against the cold as to be round as balls. Matts felt sure they were the numerous little Jensens, eager to see everything in the new country to which they had come. He hoped some of the children would be ready to slide down the stairs with Georg on his barrel staves. They seemed to find plenty to interest them, for they scrambled back on the sleds only when the two men came out and started the oxen on the final stage of their long journey. The big, handsome, horned creatures moved slowly and steadily down the road toward the watching Matts. At the turn into the clearing the sled-runners caught in the ruts of the main road and for a mo-

ment resisted the pull of the oxen, but they were like chips trying to pause on the brink of Niagara. A sudden lunge of the animals against the yoke and the sleds were jerked out of the road into the irregular path which led to the cabin.

Matts greeted the newcomers at the turn and walked toward the house with them, helping his father guide the oxen. The sleds were piled high with the family possessions and seemed to be full of little Jensens, who jumped off and ran along with him. On one of the sleds, on a heap of bedding, sat Mrs. Jensen, her youngest child in her arms. She was a little, dark-eyed woman, unlike the blond, blue-eyed Swedes to whom Matts was accustomed. As they drew near, she looked at the tiny windowless cabin without a change of expression. She was thin and white, with dark circles under her eyes, and held the little boy wearily as if his weight were too much of a burden for her. The sled stopped in front of the door, and she called to the oldest child, a girl of fourteen, to take the baby. As the slender girl bent over to lift him, Matts pushed her aside.

"All the mothers round here let Matts hold their babies," he said, in gay explanation to Mrs. Jensen. "You let me take that big fellow."

Lena Jensen looked up into his pleasant face with the pale glimmer of a smile.

"He is pretty heavy for Christina to carry," she said, as Matts deftly lifted the bundled child, "but she will hold him in the cabin till we can get a bed to put him in."

Talking gayly to Christina, who followed him in, Matts made her sit on a log stool he had made. He put the baby in her arms, saying, "Now you sit in this fine American rocking-chair till I bring in the rest of the furniture."

Christina submitted with a little giggle of pleasure, and sat holding the baby and watching the unloading of the

sleds. The kitchen stove was brought in first, set in its place, and the stovepipe stuck through the partially safeguarded opening. With Matts's help Mrs. Jensen started a fire, and soon a pleasant warmth began to spread through the frigid room.

Matts was full of merry jokes for the tired half-frozen children, and they began to forget their discomfort as he pictured the wonders of the country to which they had come.

"You wait till I take you out shooting prairie chickens. You will think it is raining birds," he said, impressively; "and the wild grapes down by the coulee will tie your mouths into such pretty little bowknots that you will want to wear them with your best clothes. And the hazelnuts! You just wait till you go hunting for hazelnuts! We 'll have to walk home this way." He bent over like a man carrying a weight too heavy for him, and staggered across the room, followed by shouts of joyous laughter from the children.

Just at this moment Jensen came in. "Here, what 's all this laughing about?" he said angrily. "You children get out there and bring in the bedding."

The sobered children went out into the cold, and struggled to disentangle the wedged feather-beds and the quilts which had been packed many times since they had first started on their travels in far-away Sweden. Mrs. Jensen directed their efforts with an exhausted and hopeless air. This was the third time since she had crossed the terrifying ocean that she had struggled to make a home out of a rude cabin. The first time her courage had been high, but now she felt like the helpless victim of a man whose only thought was the bag of gold at the end of the rainbow. Jensen's hope of building up a great fortune in the wilderness, where new and cheaper lands awaited the settler, had become a madness. To that end he was ready to sac-

rifice his wife and children without a second thought. But Lena Jensen's pioneering spirit had been broken long since. The true woman pioneer is a rare creature. Most of the women who pioneer do not go into the wilds of their own choice, but follow the men they love, and, victims of a fate stronger than their will, bear what must be borne. Lena Jensen loved her children, and like a frantic mother bird followed them from one temporary shelter to another.

"My mother sent this to you," said Matts, bringing in a big copper kettle full of frozen soup, and placing it on the stove, "and she sent some bread, too, which I put over there in the corner. In a few minutes I 'll have it all hot for you."

He brought the bread from the bench where he had laid it, and put it in the oven to warm as he spoke. Mrs. Jensen stared at him for a moment and suddenly burst into tears. She sobbed hysterically for a minute, but quickly controlled herself again. No one except Matts and the wondering children had seen her break down. In a moment she was directing the men who had just come in with some furniture. She kept her face half averted, but her voice was without a tremor. A deep pity stirred in Matts's warm heart. He had a flash of feeling that it was pretty hard on the women — this business of opening up a new country.

By this time a bed was set up on which the baby could be laid while Christina helped her mother. Matts stacked the wood behind the stove where it would be close at hand and could dry a little before it was used. He filled a kettle with snow and set it on the back of the stove. As the snow melted, he brought in more until there was hot water ready for use. Jensen had dug no well, and the tiny stream from which he expected to get his water was some distance off and almost completely frozen over by now.

Cold currents of air were coming in around the

imperfect casing of the stovepipe and preventing the room from warming quickly. Matts, seeing Mrs. Jensen shiver, brought some chunks of frozen dirt, thawed them as well as he could, and stopped up the opening more effectively. By the time the sleds were unloaded, the cabin had begun to warm. With a lighted candle stuck in the neck of a bottle, it was possible to keep the door closed and still see to move about in the windowless room. The icy air blew in over the door sill, and the dirt floor was criss-crossed with cold draughts, but, after the long day on the wind-swept sleds, no one had a word of complaint.

As soon as the soup was heated, Matts helped Mrs. Jensen feed the children. He broke off hunks of bread with which they could sop up the hot liquid. His father and Olaf had gone out to put the oxen in a temporary brush shelter back of the cabin, and to feed them. Nils came in after a time to get some of the melted snow water and carry it out to the animals in a pail.

When the children's hunger was satisfied, Matts helped Mrs. Jensen undress them. Their outer coverings ranged all the way from coats of their father's and petticoats of their mother's to grain sacks and pieces of old hairless buffalo robes. Matts made a game of it as he peeled off layer after layer, pretending that he did not think there was any child inside after all. Mrs. Jensen laughed for the first time.

"You must be a good daughter to your mother," she said.

Matts smiled apologetically. "I 'm afraid I 'm not much good at helping, but I like children. I hope these little towheads will go bee-hunting with me some day. There 's a fine tree full of honey in your woods. Will you go with me?" he asked of the circle of listening children.

They shyly assented, their faces saying more than their words.

"I hope you 'll like New Sweden," Matts went on, looking at Mrs. Jensen. "There are good people here, and when the trees are cut off the land is rich. The school is just down the road, and we have a fine church. There 's prayer meeting every Wednesday night. You 'll want to go. That is," he added as he saw the woman's worn look, "after you get settled a little and the place begins to feel like home."

"I 'm tired," she said, abruptly. "Everything 's always going to be better, but it never is. We 're always moving and no good ever comes of it. Sometimes I wish I was dead."

Matts looked at her, dumbfounded. The women he knew never spoke like that. They worked till they dropped, but they never talked about their burdens or their despairs. He could not have been more surprised if his father's oxen had expressed a doubt of Nils's right to own cattle.

"It 's nice country," he repeated, mechanically. "You 'll like it." Then, as if sensing that she needed something other than the ordinary consolations offered to women, he added, "I forget to worry over the hard work, myself, because there are so many things in the world I like to know about. My back does n't ache mowing if I can watch the bees in the clover. When I have a row of corn to hoe, I open the inside of an ant hill and look at the ants for a time and then I don't find the row so very long."

Mrs. Jensen looked at him a moment, the tragedy in her face unchanged and her eyes darkening with mystification.

"All I know about ants is they get into the molasses," she answered, shortly. "I 've got troubles enough of my own without going out of the house to look for others." Matts did not answer, but he brought a chair close to the stove.

"You sit here where it 's warm," he said, "and I 'll get the children into bed. Come on, young rabbits," he called

to the watching little boys, "get into your holes before the fox catches you."

There was joyous tumult during the process of preparation for bed. Mrs. Jensen sat by the fire, nursing the baby, while Matts, under her direction, sorted out the bedding which was piled in the corner, arranged the rude beds in place, and tucked in the half-undressed children amid shouts of laughter. The three boys were in one bed and Christina in another. On the third bed Matts placed the rest of the bedding, smoothing it out as well as he could. He was putting fresh wood on the fire when the men came in.

"Well, Matts," said Nils, "we can start home now. Jensen wants you to work for him another week getting out logs for the barn. He can have his barn-raising before the cattle freeze if he hurries. I told him I could let you come."

There were sounds of joy from the little figures on the beds.

"Keep quiet there," said Jensen, sharply; "no one is talking to you."

The children subsided instantly.

Mrs. Jensen laid the sleeping baby beside Christina.

"We left our cow and the chickens behind us until the barn could be ready," she said. "I don't know how I can feed the children without the cow."

"I tell you it can be done," said Jensen, sullenly. "Women are always kicking. Bring them to a good home like this and there is always something wrong about it. Get my supper and stop trying to make trouble!"

Matts saw a deep flush sweep over Mrs. Jensen's face, but she did not speak. Silently she dipped out a bowlful of the soup and gave it to her husband. He was drinking it with noisy gulps as Nils and Matts started to go. He paid no attention to them as they swung open the door, but

Mrs. Jensen murmured a word of thanks after them as they stepped out into the darkness.

When the door had closed behind them, shutting in the light of the windowless building, the cabin seemed instantly to sink back into a shapeless mass of logs in the clearing. Its vague outlines no more suggested a home for human beings than would a dark mound of earth stripped by the wind of its covering snow.

Matts could not put Mrs. Jensen out of his mind. Her face of misery seemed to move across the snow in front of him. No one in the struggle of this hard life had time to be sorry for women. He wondered if other women — if his own mother — had dark hours of hopelessness. If so, they kept them to themselves. To-day for the first time he had seen face-to-face suffering, naked and quivering, and the memory was a hurt he could not put from him. No one else seemed to pity Mrs. Jensen. His father had said no word of sympathy. Why did her fate seem sad to him alone? Was it because he was a natural loafer, as his father so often told him, that he was sorry for a woman who had no life but that of labor too heavy for her to bear? He had escaped the lesser misery of a drudgery his body could endure by filling his life with the world of wonder about him. Could he help her to do the same? When he next saw her, he would tell her what this exacting land had given him of joy and delight in return for the hard work he had given it. And the children! He looked forward with boyish eagerness to a week of work with all those little children at his heels. What a pretty girl Christina was, and how helpful to her mother!

## CHAPTER IV

THE next week was cold and clear. No snow fell, and the cutting of the trees for the barn went on rapidly. Each tree that fell opened a space for the spring planting of corn and potatoes, and every burned-over area was already prepared for the growing of rich harvests of wheat. Jensen selected and cut the trees. His axe rose and fell tirelessly. Tree after tree dropped with precision in line with those already lying on the ground. He worked almost without pause, steadily enlarging the clearing and adding to the pile of logs on the edge of the woods.

Matts followed him, trimming off the branches of the fallen trees, and, with the help of the oxen, hauling the logs to the site Jensen had selected for the barn. The animals stood patiently, trying out the taste of the trampled snow with exploratory tongues, while Matts fastened big chains round the ends of the tree trunks. At a signal from him they pushed slowly and irresistibly into the wooden yoke, pulling the jerking, reluctant logs behind them over the rough ground. The younger Jensen children followed Matts back and forth, laughing at his sallies and eager to help him. They were allowed to lift the end of a chain or to drag a branch out of the way, so that they felt necessary and important. Jensen kept a sharp eye upon the children to see that they were busy. He was as merciless a driver of them as of himself.

One of the boys, seven-year-old Jens, a slender child, dark like his mother, scantily clothed and red with the cold, Jensen kept with him, piling brush and carrying into the house wood that was the size for the stove. Matts had

to hold down his mounting anger when he saw the loads Jensen put upon the boy. He helped him when he could, and had words of merry encouragement whenever the child passed by. Little Jens, like all children, loved him at once.

The second morning Jensen had sent Matts to cut some specially big trees he had marked in the timber beyond the clearing. Matts took Jens with him, and when they were out of sight of the house he told him, as a great secret, that he had brought him along to show him his own bee-tree. He cautioned the boy not to tell anyone, and next summer, when the hive was full, they would come here together, build a smudge at the foot of the tree, and, after the bees had flown out, fill pails with beautiful golden honey to take home to his mother. Jens was all excitement, and wanted to climb up at once to the hollow, high in the trunk of the tree, which Matts pointed out to him. But Matts held him back and told him if they disturbed the hive too often the bees would fly away forever and there would be no more honey for Jens or any other boy.

"Watch the bees on the flowers next summer," said Matts, "and see whether they fly straight toward the tree. If they do, you will know that they are your own bees working to make your honey, and not Burghardt or Lindblom bees."

Jens stood at the foot of the tree, watching the dark hole which looked so silent and descrted, and wishing impatiently that summer would come. Matts walked on in search of the blazed trees, for he felt sure Jensen must be wondering why the sound of the axe on the trunk was so long delayed. He left Jens to come when he was ready. He smiled to himself as he followed his unhurried way and thought how dull it must be to see nothing in the world but the chopping of trees.

By the end of the week Matts had special names for all

the children. The three older boys were the buffalo, the owl, and the fox, and he always addressed each by an imitation of his namesake's call.

"We 'll have to get this barn done soon to take care of all these little animals," he said, as the children followed the oxen dragging logs from the woods.

"I don't want to live in the barn," said the little towhead whom Matts addressed as the buffalo.

"Oh, no, of course not," answered Matts, "we would n't put you in the barn. We always keep our buffalo in the house, but the owl and the fox will like the barn."

The buffalo looked a little crestfallen to be thought different from the others. Just then his mother came out of the cabin, and walked toward them.

"Is n't it true," called Matts, "that we always keep buffalo in the house?"

Mrs. Jensen looked puzzled at the question, but smiled when she saw the circle of happy children.

"We cannot keep buffalo or anything else in that cabin," she said, desperately. "I can't burn a candle all the time, and if I leave the door open long the baby begins to cough. Olaf always says he 's too busy. Could you come and cut a hole for a window?"

Matts assented cheerfully.

"Of course I could," he said. "Just wait a minute while I tell Jensen I won't be back for the next load of logs right off."

"No," she called, suddenly, as he started away, "don't tell him. He 'll say no. You come and do it. Oscar can stay by the oxen."

Matts stared at her, astonished, but he followed her into the cabin without venturing to look toward the woods where the sound of chopping went on ceaselessly. Here was a person after his own heart: she did not think there should be only one master in a house! Little, frail creature,

she had courage to match her will against that bully, Jensen. He was glad she did. If she was willing to stand out against him in little things like windows, she ought to defy him in the big things. Why had she followed him to New Sweden in misery instead of staying where she had already made a home? Matts puzzled over this all the way to the house.

Mrs. Jensen pointed out the place where she wanted the window. Matts pulled out the straw between the logs, and with his axe chopped a hole large enough to start the sawing. He cut one log in two places and lifted it out. He had just started to saw a second when footsteps, crunching the snow, approached the door, and Jensen came in.

"What 's this?" he said furiously to Matts. "What you fooling round here for? I 'm hiring you to drag logs, not to sit by the fire."

Mrs. Jensen had trembled and turned white when her husband stormed into the house, but she faced him resolutely now, and started to speak. Matts interrupted her hastily. "You see," he said with a pleasant smile, "I forgot to put in a window, and here is my chance to do it and get warm at the same time. I 'll be out before long, all thawed and ready to make the oxen race."

Jensen's face turned a dark red. "I 'll have you know," he said threateningly, "that when I want windows in my house I 'll tell somebody to make them or I 'll make them myself. I don't need your meddling. Get back to your work in the clearing."

"I 'll just finish this log that I 've commenced," answered Matts, unmoved, "and be with you in a minute."

Jensen started toward Matts in a sudden fury, his arm uplifted. "You do what I say and get out of here!" he said, raging.

Mrs. Jensen sprang forward and clutched at his arm

with a cry. "Olaf, don't you touch him! I told him to cut the window."

"You?" Jensen shouted, and struck at her with his clenched fist.

But Matts was too quick for him. He caught the arm and held it as in a vise. Even Jensen's powerful muscles were helpless against the strength of unspent youth.

Matts spoke softly to him, almost as though he were speaking to a child. "You can't do that," he said. "You can't do that. You see, you might hurt her."

Jensen choked with rage. "Hurt her?" he stammered, almost losing his power of speech, "that 's what I want to do after I 've hurt you worse."

"Oh, no," went on Matts, still speaking in a low voice, "You don't want to hurt her. Who 'd do your cooking? And you don't want to hurt me. Who 'd get your logs in for the barn? Come on, Jensen — you can't lose these good hours of daylight. It 'll be dark in a couple of hours. I 'll be with you in a minute. We 'll tell the children to get the oxen turned round ready for me when I 'm done in here. That little August knows how to drive a steer as well as a grown man."

In a flood of talk, half relevant, half a flow of pleasant words, Matts led Jensen to the door, towering over the little, gnarled man with his own fair bulk, and walked a few steps from the house with him.

"See you don't take long," Jensen sullenly yielded, and started off uneasily toward the half-cut tree beside which he had left his axe.

Matts called some directions to August, who was standing by the oxen, and went back into the cabin. The door was wide open and the cold air was pouring in. Mrs. Jensen sat on a stool, shivering as though with a fit of ague.

Matts closed the door quietly and went back to his saw-

ing without a word. He whistled cheerfully, paying no attention to his companion.

"I 've always noticed," he said after a time, as though reminding himself of what had happened, "that when a man gets mad he always jumps on the people he likes best. We men are funny creatures. But I tell you, Jensen 's going to like this window when I get it done." He sawed vigorously in a continuing silence. "You 'd better get out a rag for me to nail across the opening. I 'm nearly done."

The saw cut through the base of the last log, and Matts lifted it out and laid it by the stove. "Oscar had better get an axe and split that or it won't go in the fire box," he remarked cheerfully. "Now for the cloth."

Mrs. Jensen, with the baby in her arms, came to his side and, without a word, handed him a piece of white cotton. He deftly fastened it in place with some strips of wood, and stood admiring his handiwork. "Now you 've got a nice room, and you won't have to choose whether you 'd rather freeze or go blind. I 'll put another stick of wood in the stove to warm up all this cold air we 've been letting in."

He put down the stove lid after stirring up the fire and putting in the wood, and started for the door. Mrs. Jensen stopped him with a gesture.

"I 'm sorry I got you into trouble," she said in a strangled voice. "You were so kind to me the other day. I thought you 'd like to help. The children are too little. Life is so hard for a woman — " she broke off.

Something warm and impulsive woke in Matts.

"I 'll be the children's oldest brother," he said with his quick smile, "and you can boss me all you want. Jensen 's too busy," he said, as if in half-humorous explanation, "to do the little things the women always want, so you just let me do them for you. They all say I 'm lazy at home because I won't run the plough all day without stopping a

minute to see what 's happening around me, but my mother will tell you I can turn my hand to anything in the house — if I will! But I guess they 're right when they call me a loafer," he added, gayly.

"No, you 're not," said the woman, passionately. "You 're good!"

Matts was startled at her vehemence, but with a laughing "Thank you" he picked up his axe and went out. Christina, who had been piling brush near the edge of the clearing, greeted Matts with a smile as she passed him on her way into the house to help her mother with the baby. She was a very shy child, and had yielded less to Matts's gay ways than the other children, but she watched all he did and said with grave, wondering eyes.

Jensen hardly spoke to him the rest of the day, but they both worked steadily till dusk, and the pile of logs became appreciably larger.

"A few more days and there 'll be logs enough," ventured Matts, as the two were loosening the chain on the last haul. Jensen grunted in reply. Undiscouraged, Matts went on: "Better ask the minister to tell them at church service to-morrow that the barn-raising will be next week. Everybody round here goes to church, and some of them might not see a notice in Burghardt's store."

Jensen made a brief reply, and received the rest of Matts's cheerful remarks in dead silence. The children had already gone into the house, so that the men put the oxen into their shelter and fed them without help. As they walked toward the house, the cloth window shone brightly, diffusing the light from within, but Jensen made no remark upon it. Neither did he invite Matts to come in and get warm before he started on the long, cold walk home. They parted without a word. As he went out toward the road, Matts heard the door open and close again with a heavy thud. A moment later he thought he heard a muffled

cry. Was it his imagination playing him false, or might it have been the shout of one of the children? Or was it something the very thought of which made the beat of his own heart suffocate him?

## CHAPTER V

THE steeple of the little Lutheran church in New Sweden carried no bells with which to summon its congregation to worship. Most of the parishioners lived too far away to hear the ringing of bells had there been any, but no member of the community needed a reminder. The Sunday services were the great event of the week, and everyone well enough to sit up in an ox cart or to crouch on a sled came. The old people looked to Sunday as the time to gather strength for the trials of each week, and the young people as an opportunity for decorous fellowship under the supervising eyes of their elders. The day did not offer any of the rough convivialities of the harvest festivals or of the neighborhood gatherings, but it was still bright with promise to youth, eternally tiptoe with expectation.

The day after the window was cut in the Jensen house, Matts and his family arrived early at the church. While his father and the women went inside, Matts drove the oxen to the sheds in the back and fastened them there beside the single oxen of their poorer neighbors and the horses of the more prosperous. As he came back to the church door, he saw that the Jensen sled had just arrived and Christina and Oscar were waiting while their father drove the animals to shelter.

"Well, little reindeer," was Matts's smiling greeting, "so you have brought the owl and the buffalo to church, I see. They need it badly. But where are your mother and the other little wild animals?"

"Mother 's got a pain in her side where she got hurt," answered Christina, timidly.

Matts's smile dropped. "What hurt her?" he asked, his voice harsh with feeling.

Christina looked around uneasily. "Nothing," she said; "she just got hurt."

Matts's look was one fierce interrogation as he drew a breath to speak again. Just then Jensen appeared round the corner of the church. Matts crowded down his flooding wrath, turned his back abruptly, and went into the building.

The air in the little meetinghouse was acrid with the smell of hot iron. The big-bellied sheetiron stove in the centre, with its drum-like enlargements of pipe above, was aglow. Matts walked to a bench on the men's side.

He could see his mother already in her seat on the other side of the church, and Olga beside her with the withered arm shielded by a bright red knitted shawl. The summer before, Olga had picked wild strawberries for Mrs. Burghardt and had earned enough to buy the coveted shawl which she had seen lying on a shelf in the store. The purchase represented many hours of wearisome walking for the crippled girl, and painstaking search for the fruit, hidden as it was in the grass of the clearings or in the low growth which filled the sunny openings in the woods. But Olga's heart was happy because under its disguising folds she did not seem to herself so very different from the other girls.

Gradually the little building was filling with bundled, red-cheeked children, yellow-haired women, and tall, thin-faced men. Long neck-scarves were unwound, big coats were taken off and piled in a heap by the door, and stiff hands were thawed at the stove, which was lavishly sending out visible columns of heat into the room. The brilliant sunlight shone through the windows of the ungarnished little room, and the unplaned boards gave back a tawny glow, like a separate light of their own.

Hard-worked men and women sat with folded hands and expectant hearts on the wooden benches, their heads bent in prayer, as the congregation settled quietly into the seats. The pastor was a stern-looking man in his Sunday blacks, with the neckerchief of his ministry startlingly white below his bronzed and wrinkled face. His manner was austere and rebuking. The service was long and the sermon denunciatory, but his listeners did not waver in their attention, and some of them gravely nodded when he dwelt on the sins of man and the uncertainty of salvation, as if in sad, inner assent.

Matts, to whom the weekly sermon was usually a matter of interest, if only as his chance to disagree heartily — though secretly — with the minister's condemnation of life and belittling of the world of wonders about him, found his mind too distracted to fix itself upon the words that thundered in his ears. His heart was full of hot indignation which his inactivity only increased. He watched little Christina on the front bench, as she listened reverently to the fiery apostle of Luther. The outlines of her face against the window were as pure and delicate as those of the saints of old. Matts looked at her with a pitying tenderness. How much did the shrinking child already know of grief and tragedy? He felt an inner thankfulness that Jensen was in the back of the church so that he was not visible from where he sat. It was bad enough to know that he was making the room hateful by his presence.

Matts had always lived among people who expected women to work to the limit of their strength. The men about him were often rough in their speech to the women of their families, but he had never seen a woman struck. The thought that one woman had been abused because she had tried to protect him was agony. But what could he do about it? Of course, he could beat Jensen. He could kill him, for that matter, without much effort. Jensen was a

coward, who would never dare to attack a man. Women and children were the natural prey of such beasts. But how would his death help matters? Matts clenched his fists and tried to keep his mind on the sermon.

When the last hymn was sung and the benediction given, the minister stepped down from the platform and said that Brother Jensen wanted to speak to them a moment. Jensen left his bench and walked clumsily to the front.

"I got my logs ready for a barn," he began. "Friday we will have a raising. I want you all to come. Somebody helped you make your barn. Now you help me. Maybe some day I will do something for you, too."

He backed away, red with the effort of speaking. The minister in a few words asked God's blessing on the building of a new home, and the meeting broke up.

Most of the church members were staying for the Sunday school and prayer meeting of the afternoon, so the women began to unpack their baskets of lunch and the men to pull the benches round so that families might group themselves together. The pastor went from one little circle to another, speaking words of greeting and asking questions as to the health of each member of a family and the well-being of their animals. He discussed with them the prospects of an early spring, the price of eggs, the chance of raising turkeys so far north, and the best way to pay off the church debt. He specially inquired for the absent, since nonattendance at church usually meant serious sickness at home.

When Matts saw Christina pass to her father and brother chunks of bread and cheese from a bag at her side, he knew they must be planning to stay for the afternoon services. His mother set out some food for him on a bench near by. He hastily ate it and, unnoticed in the general break-up after the lunches were finished, slipped

out of the building. He quickly ran down the steps, and, bending against the rising wind, walked toward the north.

The sky had the leaden hue that threatens snow. The wind forced him to catch his breath now and then as a sudden gust swept by him. His face tingled with the cold, but he was hot enough within. The rage against cruelty to the weak, a passion almost as overwhelming as that of cruelty itself, burned in his heart. A blind impulse was driving him to Mrs. Jensen, to try to make up to her somehow for the brutality he could neither prevent nor avenge. He would tell her of his horror and pity, so that she might know that all men were not like Jensen.

The contemptible cur! How could any woman consent to live with such a man? He supposed it must be the children that had held her to him. He had a sudden sense of the inevitable helplessness of mothers. A woman with children must have been, always and everywhere, a prisoner to the man who could support her. In this harsh pioneer country, a wife who hated her husband must live with him or perish in the cold. Even if the neighbors were willing to share their poverty with her, what of the children? Matts tramped on, seeing as in an endless series the fetters life forges for each of us until no one is free.

Before long he turned into the little clearing where he had worked so many weeks. All was silent except for the soft impact of the loose snow as it was blown against the sides of the cabin. A thin thread of smoke, unrolling slowly from the rim of the chimney, was snatched away by the wind as soon as it emerged.

Matts knocked at the door. Mrs. Jensen opened it, looking at him in astonishment.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, her face paling.

"No," answered Matts, embarrassed, and wondering suddenly why he had come. "I was walking home from church, and I thought I would come in and get warm."

"Oh, yes," she said, relieved. "Come in, of course. It is easy for us to keep warm," she added gratefully, "with all that wood you cut."

She closed the door as she spoke, and motioned him to a stool by the stove. As she turned with a quick motion to follow him, she gave a sudden gasp, put her hand to her side, and stood a moment leaning against the wall. The children had rushed toward Matts as he came in, and he had caught the youngest up in his arms when he heard Mrs. Jensen's sharp breath. He turned, staring at her and clutching the child. In a moment she had got control of herself and sat down on a chair, her face still white and contracted with pain.

"Did the minister preach strong words?" she said faintly, avoiding his stormy look.

"Are you badly hurt?" he asked impetuously, ignoring her question. "I hate myself for getting you into trouble."

She flushed painfully. "It is nothing. There are so many things to knock against when you live in one room."

Matts hesitated for the fraction of a second. In the simple directness of his own nature there was no place for evasion, and he had little understanding of the workings of a woman's pride. If he could have taken the rope she flung to him, the course of their two lives might have been changed.

His look went round the room, so scantily furnished, and then came back to her.

"Why do you try to hide it?" he cried. "He struck you, and it was all my wicked fault. Can you ever forgive me?"

A flash of expression crossed her face, drawn as it was with pain, that was like light on a storm cloud. She started to speak — and then suddenly burst into wild tears. She had been able to endure suffering and torture without a sound, but the few words of impassioned kindness broke her endurance. Her shaking sobs were punctured with

sharp cries of anguish, "Oh, I can't bear it, I can't bear it!"

Matts stood by, appalled. He put the startled children aside and bent over her awkwardly, saying such soothing words as he could muster. But her self-control, once broken, was not easily restored. She sank down as though her strength had left her, until she was crouched on the bare floor, her face hidden in her arms, sobbing and crying, "O God, help me! It 's hard to be a woman!"

The little boys began to cry in sympathy, and the baby on the bed woke and fretted. Matts picked up the child and spoke to him and to the other children in his old playful way, until they began to laugh a little and turn their attention from the moaning woman on the floor. Gradually she quieted, and the self-mastery gained through years of struggle began to reassert itself.

Matts had started the children building a house out of some blocks of wood he had brought them from the sawmill a week before. He was holding the baby and trying at the same time to help the little boys make walls that would not tumble down as soon as they were put up. The four were busily at work, their eyes intent on the blocks, as Mrs. Jensen pulled herself to her feet and walked over to them.

"I 'll take the baby," she said, in an expressionless voice.

Matts got up from the floor and put the baby in her arms. He looked sadly at her tear-changed face and started to speak, but she turned abruptly away and sat down, soothing the baby and getting him ready to be put back in his bed. When he was quiet and asleep, she went to the stove and lifted a lid to put in another log. Matts left the children, who were absorbed in their play, and went up to her, taking the stick from her hand.

"Let me do that for you," he said, gently. "You are tired. You must rest."

She lifted her eyes to his as he stood close to her. The

firelight from the opened stove intensified her look of suffering, but a deeper radiance than that from the flames played about her face. Her words came uncertainly, as if they were forcing their way up from unfamiliar depths.

"No one has spoken to me as you have for years. I forgot there was any kindness left in the world. Only the children cared whether I lived or died. I have been that man's slave and dog, to kick and abuse, for fifteen years. I shall be his slave and dog till I die. But the thought of your goodness will comfort me every day of my life."

Her voice dropped almost to a whisper as she finished. Her eyes were fixed on his, but she hesitated a moment as though waiting for a word from him. When he did not speak, some inner spell seemed to dissolve and a look of terrified consciousness flashed across her face. Her eyes fell and her color came sweeping back in a flood. She motioned Matts to put the stick in the fire box. When it was in place, she set the cover down, her face averted from his gaze.

Matts stood looking at her, too confused to know what to say or do. His compassion was struck dumb by his sudden glimpse into a cauldron of emotions stronger than any he had ever felt or known. The bodily hurt which had so roused his anger was as nothing to the more lasting hurt dealt to the soul of this woman. He felt as if he had looked into the very fires of hate. Her words about himself had fallen upon unhearing ears. The one impulse which had made it possible for her to go on living was her love for her children, and he felt he could share with them in her affections. He would help her as they did by cherishing and serving her in this hard life. He thought of Christina's pure little profile, as he had seen it in church, and wondered whether her shrinking shyness was the grief she carried for her mother. He would carry it with her after this, and perhaps make it more bearable that way.

As he towered above Mrs. Jensen, his tall head almost touching the rafters, he put his hand, roughened by hard work, gently on her shoulder.

"The children and I will take care of you," he said, almost as he might have spoken to Christina. "Don't be afraid. It won't be so bad now that we can help."

She seized his hand and pressed it to her cheek, clinging to it as if she could not let it go.

"Yes, yes," she cried, half sobbing, "I know you will! I know you will. Oh, I will not be ungrateful. I am so alone. You will not forget me."

She dropped his hand and looked up, the tears still wet on her cheek. They stared at each other with startled eyes.

"Go," she said, breathlessly. "It is getting late. Thank you for coming. I hope you will not be cold."

She did not look at him again while he said good-bye to the boys and, with a smothered word of farewell to her, went out of the door. When he was gone, she threw herself on the bed.

"What have I done, what have I done!" came from her in little whispered sobs. "Oh, how can I live and suffer so!"

The children watched her uneasily for a time, but they soon returned to their blocks. The darkness in the room deepened, and she finally forced herself to get up and light the lamp. As she moved about, languidly preparing the evening meal, she paused constantly to listen for the sound of a sled on the snow outside the house.

Along the wind-swept road, Matts, the child of a sternly undemonstrative race, walked north toward home in a tumult of emotion, torn by astonishment, bewilderment, an agony of effort to understand, above all by an overwhelming pity which absorbed all lesser streams of feeling in its mighty current.

## CHAPTER VI

The next morning, Matts, contrary to his usual custom, went to his tree-cutting without stopping first at the Jensens' cabin. He found Jensen beyond the clearing, already busy marking the trees to be felled that day, and Oscar at work getting the oxen ready to draw the logs. Matts avoided speaking to Jensen as much as possible, and never looked in his direction if he could help it. When noon came, the three went into the cabin together for the midday meal.

In the noise of the children's welcome to Matts, his shy word of greeting to Mrs. Jensen went unheard. She glanced quickly at him as he came in and then busied herself in getting the food on the table, while Christina filled a wash basin with warm water for their use. The washing was a hasty process, especially on Oscar's part, but it served to warm and soften the stiffened hands of the workers before they took up their spoons and started to eat the hot soup and the cornmeal bread in front of them. The two men and Oscar sat at the table alone. The others had been already fed. While the three were eating, the younger boys went back to play with their blocks, which they had left for a moment to talk with Matts.

Jens, who was the master builder of the three, placed a large block on an already perilously balanced pile, and the whole structure fell to the ground with a loud clatter. Matts, who had sat silent during the meal, turned at the sound, and Jens cried to him, holding his hands up at the level of his head, "After you went away yesterday, I built the blocks up as high as this!"

Jensen looked at Matts suspiciously, and asked roughly, "What were you doing here yesterday?"

Matts felt his heart contract, but he did not hesitate in his reply.

"I stopped here on my way home to get warm, and the children and I piled the blocks."

"Why did n't you go home with your family in the sled?" demanded Jensen with an ugly look. "They were asking for you after the prayer meeting. Burghardt said he thought you had gone off with Karl."

Mrs. Jensen suddenly dropped a kettle which she had taken from the stove, and cried out hysterically as it crashed to the floor. Matts jumped from his stool and ran to her help, but Jensen's furious call stopped him short.

"Damn you! Let my wife alone! She can pick up her own kettle."

In Matts's church-loving community the habit of swearing was one of the cardinal sins, which set a man off as morally inferior. At Jensen's outburst Matts turned red with rage, but he had been taught to despise the blasphemer, and pulling himself together with an effort that strained all his young powers, he said quietly, "Very well. I must get back to my work," and walked out of the cabin without another word.

Jensen looked at his wife as she stood trembling with excitement by the stove.

"If you let that fellow hang around you any more," he said savagely, each word a blow, "I 'll give you a beating you won't forget for a long time."

Mrs. Jensen made no reply, but she faced her husband with a dark, sombre look he could not fathom. Christina, who was cutting up the corn bread, suddenly began to cry. Jensen turned upon her in a fury, shouted at her, shook her violently, and, rushing out of the house, slammed the heavy door behind him.

The rest of the day he and Matts avoided each other and chopped without exchanging a word. In the evening, when Matts went home, his heart was heavy within him. The next morning he invented some excuse to his father for not returning to the Jensens' and spent the day at home, building a henhouse. The hens had always been kept in the barn with the other animals, but the young chickens were occasionally stepped upon or injured by the cattle, and Matts had decided some time ago to make them a separate house. The logs and saplings for its construction had been ready for many months, but the time never seemed to come when he could begin to put them together.

Matts worked feverishly with the axe, notching and fitting the small logs together. His restless activity seemed designed to leave him no free time for thinking. As he skillfully guided his axe, he busied himself repeating verses he had been reading in one of his German books and committing to memory the long vocabulary with which the volume ended. He even propped the book itself on a log near by, so that when his mind wandered he might fix his eyes upon its pages and hold his thoughts in check.

Late in the afternoon Oscar appeared with a message for Matts from Jensen. It was little more than an appeal that he come the next day to help so that the logs might be ready in time for the barn-raising on Friday, but Matts knew that the asking of such a favor by the surly Jensen was equal to a full apology made by anyone else. Reluctantly he promised to come, yielding to Oscar's affectionate urging rather than to Jensen's request. He was full of restless desire to know how Mrs. Jensen had fared the night before, but he shrank from asking the boy. Perhaps in his inmost soul he shrank from knowing. They talked together a little, Oscar

admiring the henhouse, and listening to Matts's tales of the cleverness of the white rooster and the obstinate ways of the black hen. As a special sign of favor, he was given a glimpse of the wonderful ear of wheat which was to be the parent of the king of wheats. Before the boy started home, Matts took him into the house and gave him some of the delicious little cakes which Brigitta had learned to make as a child in Sweden, and which no housekeeper of New Sweden could equal. Oscar trudged off happily on his long walk back, his heart warm with love for his wonderful friend.

When the dinner hour came the next day, Jensen dropped his axe and started for the house. Matts did not follow, but called to Jensen that he had brought his lunch and would eat it in the woods. To Jensen's astonished remonstrance he answered, "I don't like your talk, so I 'll stay here."

Jensen looked at him, baffled, began to speak and broke off. Finally he called Oscar and went toward the house without attempting another word. That afternoon he was very subdued. He spoke little and that without his usual bluster. Oscar brightened under the change, and he and Matts chattered and laughed together at their work, apparently unmindful of everything except the pleasure of being together. Jensen watched them uneasily. He knew that Oscar would yield to a sharp word or to a blow, but this fellow Matts — what kind of creature was he, anyway?

Friday came at last, a bright, still day, ideal for the gathering of the barn-raisers. The great logs were piled in order, the first layer already lying in its place to mark the outlines of the barn that was to be. Mrs. Jensen, with the help of Christina and the little boys, had been working for a week, baking black bread and coffee cakes, caraway cookies and rye crisp to feed the helpers after

their work was done. All the neighbors had put aside part of their week's baking to help swell the great heap that reached from the shelf behind the stove to the rafters above. Mrs. Burghardt had learned to make the American doughnut, and she sent as her gift a pail full of the fat, reddish rings. Mrs. Jensen looked at them askance, but she remembered that hungry men will eat anything and hoped for the best. She promised herself to explain to the doubters that they were not of her making.

Jensen had bought a keg of whiskey, which stood propped in a corner of the cabin. A tin cup hung beside it, and a wooden spigot lay on top ready to be inserted when the bunghole was opened later in the day. The pioneers had learned to make a festivity as often as they could of the hard, essential labors of their lives, and Jensen wanted his barn-raising to be remembered.

Early Friday morning Matts yoked his cattle to the sled and loaded it with the food his mother had prepared. There had been a thaw a few days before and the snow had disappeared completely here and there, but Matts felt sure the oxen could pull the lightly laden runners even over patches of bare ground. He put a box on the floor for the women to sit upon, and made it comfortable by covering it with a pile of old grain sacks. His mother had sewed together enough of the worn bags to make a robe, and this they could tuck about themselves to keep out the worst of the cold.

When Brigitta came out of the house, she was carrying a pan of her choicest cakes, which she would entrust to no other hands. She and Olga took their places and allowed Matts to wrap them up, while she held the precious dish in her lap where it could not be knocked over and its contents spilled.

When they finally started, Matts and his father stood

on the sled, balancing themselves when the road was rough by holding to the posts set in the crossboard at the front. When the runners dragged on the bare places in the road, they jumped off and walked until they reached another snowy stretch.

"You want to watch out for Karl Burghardt," Brigitta warned her husband, when Nils was walking on the road beside her. "He is a stupid German boy, and some day he will drop a log on the man who is working under him. Don't let him get too near you. I watched him when the Lindbloms were raising their barn, and I thought he would kill somebody for sure."

"Oh, mother!" protested Olga. "Karl is awfully smart. He sings the funniest songs, and he can play the cornet with his nose."

Matts laughed.

"Karl's nose is all right. It is only here he is weak." He pointed to his head. "I found a nice German name for Karl the other day. You call him *Dummkopf,* Olga, and he 'll be pleased to think you are learning his language."

"I don't need to talk German to him. He can talk English and Swedish to me," answered Olga, her cheeks glowing.

"Don't give your heart to Karl Burghardt," said Matts, looking at her intently. "He does not think any Swedish girl is good enough for him."

"Olga is not going to think of anybody, German or Swede," said Brigitta, decidedly. "She is going to stay at home and take care of me when I get old."

A shadow crossed Olga's face, and she made an unconscious gesture as though to cover her crippled side from sight. No one except Matts noticed it. He could feel that she was unwilling to admit her deformity to herself, even after all the years — perhaps now more than ever before. He wondered if, in time, the mind could be

fitted to the paralyzed body as the grain of wheat, native to the South, had been fitted through generations to the icy and forbidding North. He feared she would never find happiness in life unless that could happen. A tender pity for her filled his heart. He would see that Karl talked to her to-day, if that was what she wanted. He was sure all she needed was to see enough of Karl. She would quickly learn what a cheap fellow he was.

Though it was still early in the morning when the Swensons reached the Jensen cabin, the clearing was full of sleds and sleighs, and the space round the barn site was dotted with men, holding axes and cant hooks in their hands, as they laughed and talked while waiting for the work to begin. Jensen was hurrying from one group to another, helping to unload the boxes of food, directing the women to the house, shouting to the children to keep out from under the oxen, and assembling the workers by the pile of logs.

Matts followed the men who were getting ready, under Nils's direction, to get the logs in position as quickly as possible. He was greeted with shouts of welcome by the young men, for his good temper and his ready wit had long since made him popular with the group. The first log had been set in place as he came up, the groove near its ends neatly cut ready for the cross logs of the next layer. Nils directed Matts, who was very skillful with the axe, to the work of hewing the upper and lower surfaces of the logs so that they would lie securely on each other. August Lindblom was doing the same work, and he and Matts, side by side, chipped at the logs with easy mastery. There was much conversation and rough joking going on around them. Matts was quickly the centre of the fun as he laughed and talked, while the chips flew out from under his tool. He would slyly mimic the speech and manners of some of the older workers, as

he swung his axe or turned a log, until the young men roared with laughter.

Meanwhile Nils was shouting directions at his toiling helpers, who were tugging and heaving the heavy logs. He ignored Jensen's excited suggestions and criticisms as he might have disregarded the buzzing of a mosquito. Whatever foolish ideas the owner of the barn might possess, the barn that Nils had charge of should be built right. There were no mechanical devices to help the workers. Each log had to be hoisted into place by sheer muscular effort, and fitted and adjusted by the skilled handlers of the cant hook and the adze, who balanced themselves precariously at the corners, working in that position until the joint was fitted close enough to satisfy Nils.

In the midst of the tumult and the hard work, a dark-eyed, dark-haired young fellow was standing not far from Matts, watching him and August hew and trim the logs which their big, blond helpers dragged to the rapidly mounting walls. He stood at a sufficient distance not to be hit by the fast-flying chips, but near enough to allow them to hear his slurring remarks upon their performance.

"Say, Dutchie," amiably shouted one of those he had particularly reviled, "come on and help, and shut your big calf-mouth."

"That 's work for oxen like you," retorted the fellow. "I got an education and I got to take care of my health."

"You 'd better salt your health down in a barrel," called August, "or it will go bad on you."

"No," said another as he braced himself to drag his log, "what Karl's health needs is to be smoked like the hams he fixed for his uncle last fall. It won't be fit to use, but it will keep forever."

This provoked a roar of laughter, for Karl had been entrusted with the smoking of the hams when the Burg-

hardts killed their pigs in November, and he had managed the fire so badly that the hams, instead of being smoked, were burned and practically ruined. Karl, who was unpopular among his mates, was not allowed to forget the incident. He withdrew from their jibes under some covering remark, and went around to the other end of the barn to find fault with the size of the opening which was being left for a door.

## CHAPTER VII

MEANWHILE, the women were sitting in the cabin, talking over the difficulties of keeping house in one small room in a new country. They gossiped about their neighbors; they discussed the school teacher, and the new minister, the state of Mrs. Gustafson's rheumatism, and the details of Adolph Holmgren's sickness and death. They gave Mrs. Jensen much kindly advice, which she rather distractedly accepted as she tried to make them all comfortable in the crowded room. Inwardly they were convinced that she could not be much of a manager, as they looked about the bare little place, but they offered her slips from their house plants, said pleasant things about her children, and tried not to resent her being so close-mouthed about her affairs.

The Johnsons had brought their old grandmother with them because they could not come and leave her alone at home. She was carried in by the men of the family and propped up in a corner by the stove. She sat there, mumbling incoherently to herself or smiling vacantly at those who came near or spoke to her. Her gnarled old face was framed by a frilled cap, white and freshly starched for the occasion, and her faded blue eyes, rimmed with red, peered out from under it. Her hands, sculptured in knobs and ridges by long years of the hardest toil, lay idle at last in her lap. They unceasingly trembled in the folds of her skirt, like little, prisoned fledglings. The children were shy of approaching her, but they peeked from behind their mothers' skirts to see what she did.

A pioneer country does not welcome the aged, and few

of the boys and girls born in New Sweden had ever seen anyone older than fifty. Even while they kept a timid distance, they envied the Johnson children the possession of so odd a treasure as a grandmother. To them she looked like a big old doll, with the wrinkled skin of a winter squash. They felt the strangeness of her folded hands in a country where the labor of the youngest child was needed. She seemed utterly different from their own active mothers, who were still working when the children went to bed and busy at the kitchen stove in the morning before they opened their eyes. No child of New Sweden had a chance to see his mother quiet except on those topsy-turvy days after a new baby was born, when she lay in bed, white and still, with the tiny newcomer beside her and everything in the house in confusion. Mercifully, those days did not come oftener than once a year, or the world would have seemed a threatening place to the young.

The babies that had been brought to the barn-raising were kept indoors. They lay on the beds or were held in their mothers' laps. Those old enough to sit up played on the floor with the wooden blocks which Rolf, the five-year-old boy, shyly offered for their use. The older ones ran in and out, watching the rapidly growing barn until they were stiff with cold, and then scurrying back to the warmth of the cabin and to the boxes of food, from which, by daring and stealth, they could filch cakes or cookies when their mothers' backs were turned.

Olga sat demurely with the gossiping women until Christina, rosy with the excitement of the great day, drew her out to see men hoist the logs to the roof of the low building. Olga followed the eager girl, trying to walk slowly to conceal her limp, and holding her long red scarf over her left shoulder to cover her shrunken arm.

Near the men who were lifting the roof beams stood

Karl, importantly repeating Nils's shouted orders. He occasionally put his hand on a log to give it an extra shove. When it did not disturb the proper placing of the beam, this was good-humoredly allowed by the others, but when he almost succeeded in rolling the big grooved trunk out of their hands, down on the back of a worker below, they protested violently. Olga drew near just as he was pushed back by the man whom he had so nearly injured, and told to let those who knew how do the work.

"It was that clumsy Johan," said Karl, undisturbed. "His fingers are made of butter, and he does n't know how to hold a cant hook."

Johan above, dexterously setting a roof beam against its fellow, only laughed. None of the men thought much of Karl as a worker, but, taciturn themselves, they liked his ready tongue, and were willing to do the work while he did the talking.

Olga watched him admiringly as he continued his jibes at the unperturbed Johan, and blushed with pleasure when he noticed her and called out, "Hello, Olga! Have n't seen you at uncle's store for a long time." Then, noticing her unconscious gesture as she drew her scarf close to her side, he added, "That 's a pretty scarf, but we 've got some on the shelf now that 'll beat it."

"I like this one best," answered the girl, suddenly radiant. "Are you back working in the store now?"

"Yes," said Karl, coming close to her side, in the confidential manner he always adopted with the girls, "I came back to keep uncle's books. He tried to keep accounts on scraps of paper and in his head, and they were always wrong. After I left Jensen, I started to work up in a lumber camp in the big woods, but it 's too hard work for me. I got too good a head to waste my time that way, so I went down to Blackbird. They got a three-

weeks commercial course there in Blackbird Academy, and I learned to bookkeep just like a city fellow." More confidentially still, as he saw the unmistakable admiration in Olga's face, he went on: "I 'm selling farm machinery on the side, and I 'm going to sell some to these dumb Swedes that think they can run a farm with a hoe. Say, Olga, don't you want to help me? You get your father to buy a reaper from me, and I 'll give you any scarf you want in the store."

Olga blushed with pleasure, so happy to be taken into Karl's confidence and made a partner in his plans that she forgot the stumps and the rough, imperfectly cleared ground, which would make a reaper on their farm about as useful as a plough at the North Pole.

"I 'll try," she said, shyly, and could think of nothing more to say.

Karl, however, did not notice her embarrrassed silence, for he rushed off to harangue the men who were not cutting the notches on the roof beams to his satisfaction. Olga stood with Christina watching the gradually closing roof, nearly ready for the hand-split shakes which would serve as a final protection against the weather. She stole glances at the talkative Karl whenever she could do so unobserved. The others were abusing him for his laziness and at the same time laughing at his quick retorts. She was full of wonder at his nimble wit, never without a word to fling back at his companions! She always marveled at people who could talk. Her own life was so silent that her very thoughts were stillborn. Her feelings seemed able to exist without words, but her ideas halted without expression. No one at home ever talked except Matts, and he preferred to read. But Karl was always talking. How much he must know! She could imagine how small he must have made those city fellows feel at Blackbird when he began to tell them things. Her courage

sank a little as she thought of urging her father to buy a reaper, but she had given her promise and she would try.

Her heart could not help beating with happiness. The sky was so bright, the shouts of laughter so frequent, the horseplay getting more boisterous as the day advanced and the effect of frequent visits to the whiskey keg became more apparent, showed so gay and irresponsible a mood, that the sad-hearted girl could not fail to respond, and to forget for the moment the pain of her difference from the red-cheeked, chaffing young women about her. She followed Karl's every motion with shining eyes. His consciousness of her whole-hearted admiration made his antics more extreme and his boasts louder than ever. He kept drawing attention to her by his actions in ways that fascinated her even while they made her blush with embarrassment.

"Come over here and see Johan cut off his foot," he shouted, seizing her arm and dragging her with him. He pointed to the handsome, blond fellow on the roof of the barn, notching grooves along the ridgepole for the split saplings which would form the base on which shakes could later be fastened.

Olga found herself laughing and waving her hand to Johan in a way that would have seemed impossible to her an hour ago.

"You could show him better ways to do it, I know," she said to Karl, excitedly. "I think you are the smartest of them all."

Karl patted her shoulder, and whispered, "Do you know, Olga, there are n't many girls I like the way I like you. Why can't you come down to the store once in a while and let me see you?"

She looked up at him, her face sparkling like the leaves of a wind-tossed birch. "I 'll get Matts to bring me

the next time he comes to the store," she said, in an unaccustomed rush of words. "You know, I did not think you would ever care to talk to me. You have such a fine education and you know so many city girls, too. Any girl would be proud to know you."

"That 's all right," said Karl, masterfully. "You 're a nice little girl, and when you come to the store I 'll give you some lemon drops, and uncle 'll never miss them."

Olga felt a momentary qualm at his last words, for the Swenson honesty was deep-seated, but Karl's assurance overbore her doubts and she answered gratefully, "I 'll come."

As she looked up, she saw Matts's eyes fixed upon her. Her hampering self-consciousness, which had left her for the moment, returned with a rush, flooding her cheeks with crimson, and making her pale face burn.

"I must go and help Mrs. Jensen," she said to Karl hastily. "I 'll pick out some nice cakes for you to eat," she added, with a shy smile.

Karl let her go with a little push of friendly boisterousness. She limped back to the house in a confusion of emotions — excitement, admiration, humility, whispering to herself, as if the thought were made more real by the saying, "He likes me. I know he likes me." Then hesitatingly, "Even if I am —" but the painful words refused to come and the sentence remained unfinished.

Within the house everything was ready for the feast to celebrate the finishing of the barn. Great cans of milk stood beside the whiskey keg, and there were tin cups stacked up in plenty. Bread, biscuits, fried cornmeal mush, cheese, honey, and cakes were piled on the table, and hot coffee was ready on the stove for those who did not care for whiskey or milk.

Shouts of jubilation outside announced that the last log was in place, and, in an excitement partly natural and

partly the result of a free and hospitable sharing of the contents of the keg, Jensen and some of the other men burst into the house. They loaded themselves with food and carried it out by the barn, where they set it on the floor of a sled and invited all the workers to help themselves. It was a mild day, so they could eat as well as work in comfort in the open air. This was fortunate, for the little cabin was already crowded to suffocation with the women and children. The whiskey keg was moved out and set up near the sled. The men rushed toward it as they saw it coming. They laughed and shouted, pushing each other in friendly haste to drink to their success. The mounds of bread and cakes and cheese disappeared like moisture before a hot wind. The girls kept running from the house with more, as the plates emptied, and there was much gayety and good-humored joking.

Olga came out with a small plate of her mother's choicest cakes, looking timidly about for Karl. He was talking and laughing loudly with one of the Johnson girls, who was feeding him pieces of cheese between his bites of bread, and he did not look in her direction. She hesitated, and was about to go into the house again, when August Lindblom saw her from a distance and called out, "Give me some of those cakes, Olga!" He ran to seize the little white mounds, frosted with wild honey and hazelnuts, but she eluded him, and, walking up to Karl, who had turned at August's shout, said, blushingly, "Here are some of the cakes I promised you."

Karl, with a shout of joy, snatched the plateful before August could reach him, and, turning rapidly so as to keep his back to the marauder, hastily ate all except one, which he presented, slightly mangled, to Anna Johnson, after he had finished the others.

"Say, Olga," he cried, his mouth still half full, "your mother is a wonder! Anna can't cook an egg so you can

eat it — that 's why I gave her one. I want her to see how the Swensons do things."

Anna slapped him playfully, but he turned his back on her, saying as he did so, "I am going to leave you to feed your cheese to August, who knows as much about good food as a hog in a trough. I am going back to the house with Olga and see what else she can steal for me."

He took hold of Olga's arm and walked along with her.

"You 're a real friend," he said. "That Anna is a big, stupid girl, is n't she? I don't like her looks — she has n't such pretty blue eyes as you have. Did you ever see your eyes in a glass? Next time you come to the store, I 'll let you see yourself in a mirror where you won't look all green and crooked as you do in the looking-glasses uncle sells to the dumb Swedes round here."

Olga listened uncomfortably to his remark about Anna — Anna was her friend and she did not like to hear her spoken of in such a way. But every thought of anyone else was swallowed up in the intoxication of such words about herself. Karl thought she was pretty! As he walked along slowly, holding her arm close to his side, she wondered whether he could feel how her heart jumped with joy. He bent over her in intimate talk, and breathlessly she listened. Once at the cabin door, she half whispered, "You wait here a minute till I find something more," and ran inside.

He waved his hand to Anna, who was following him with her eyes, made a little grimace in the direction of the open door, and waited. While he stood there a small boy came out eating a coffee cake. Karl snatched it from the child's hand and held it tantalizingly just out of his reach, while the little fellow tried to get it by jumping. The child began to cry, and just then Olga appeared at the door with a plate in her hand. Karl tossed the

coffee cake into a pile of snow, and said to the boy, "Now run for it and don't be a baby." But the little cake had barely reached the ground when one of the dogs, hanging around the door, swallowed it at one gulp. The child screamed with rage and struck out at Karl. He seized the boy's hands and was beating him brutally when he looked up and saw Olga, standing, frozen with horror, holding the plate toward him.

Karl gave a quick laugh, and pushed the child away. "He needs a lesson," he said, swaggering. "He's got to learn that he can't hit me."

Olga, like Matts, had an instinctive loathing of cruelty, and it was not easy for Karl to soften the impression made by those few moments. But she was naturally humble, and reluctant to judge the man who seemed to her in every way wonderful, so she soon convinced herself she had neither heard nor seen aright. Karl's words of thanks for her second offering of cakes, and his devoted manner, made her heart beat rapturously again with the thought that someone found her lovely.

Until dusk the fun and feasting went on. Wrestling matches, tugs of war, jumping, and exhibits of skill and strength in lifting and pulling were held in the centre of the clearing. Each tall, fair young man struggled to excel his fellows under the eyes of the circle of blue-eyed girls, whose smiles and blushes were the victors' prizes.

It was like a primitive human drama, set against the background of an ancient forest. The two low buildings, brown with the unpeeled bark of the logs, might without alteration have sheltered the first man. The frozen ground, black and white in patches, and the engulfing silence, held out no promise of growth and change. Yet from the very heart of this untouched world came the sound of struggle, the panting breath, the straining of muscles,

the shouts of encouragement, the laughter, the movement, the vitality and energy of man, making the quiet earth echo with the tumult of his strenuous life.

The whiskey in the keg had sunk low when the time came for those who lived farthest away to fasten the oxen to the sleds and to start toward home. Some of the men, as they gathered their tools and loaded the sleds for the homeward trip, were hardly able to walk steadily. The women watched their husbands and brothers with anxious eyes. Occasionally one of the sleds had a boy at the oxen's heads in place of the man of the family, who had found he was not able to stand up and guide the animals. But everyone was jovial, and no one felt that, in such company, ten hours of hard work had been anything but a day of rest.

The Swensons were almost the last to go. Matts's mother had helped Mrs. Jensen clear up the worst of the confusion, put away what food was left, and sort out the borrowed cans and cups and other dishes to be taken home by the departing guests. Mrs. Jensen was pale and worn with the excitement and strain of the day, and had few words and fewer smiles for her friendly neighbors. Brigitta wondered how she would stand the hard years ahead of her, when every member of the family must work from dawn to dark. What was there in her haunted look so different from the open-faced directness of the women about her? Brigitta had never quite trusted a dark-haired Swede. She suspected the presence of alien blood, which made complete confidence impossible. But she felt sympathy for Mrs. Jensen in the exhausting struggle she must face.

The Swenson sled had turned into the main road when a little figure came running after it, calling breathlessly, "Matts, oh, Matts!" It was Christina, her hair blowing in the cold north wind which had sprung up in the late

afternoon. Matts jumped from the sled and ran back to her.

"Oh, Matts," she cried, clutching his arm. "I am afraid of father. Can you come back and help me?"

Matts felt a sinking of the heart.

"Yes, of course," he answered. "Just wait here a minute."

He went back to the sled, which had stopped in the middle of the road, and told his father that Christina needed his help for a little while and that he would walk home later. Nils asked no questions, after his habit, but Brigitta secretly wished, as she thought of the long walk ahead of the tired man, that he would not be such a slave to every child he met.

When he got back to Christina, she was shivering with excitement and cold.

"Father's lying in the barn, and he struck me when I tried to get him into the house. He will freeze to death if he stays there to-night, but he won't move. What can I do? If mother tries to help me — " She broke off, then went on: "He has been like this before, and — and — once mother was sick for a month afterward because of what he did to her. Oh, I ought not to tell you this,"— she broke into tears, — "but you are our only friend."

Matts felt suddenly sick. He consoled Christina as best he could, and put his coat round the shivering child. As they neared the house, the last sled was leaving. Its occupants were waving farewell to Mrs. Jensen, who stood at the door, her drooping figure outlined against the lighted room behind her.

She had stepped back and sunk into a chair, her head on her hand in utter exhaustion, as Matts and Christina came into the cabin. Christina ran to her mother and whispered a moment to her, as Matts closed the door and

stood waiting. At Christina's words Mrs. Jensen lifted her head and stared at Matts.

"You cannot get free from us," she said in a harsh voice. "Because you have been kind to us once, we ask everything of you. Oh, my God!"

She continued to stare at him, as though looking, not at the living man before her, but at some phantom of her imagination.

But Matts, with the fine instinct of a sensitive nature, ignored her emotion and became at once quietly practical. He asked for details as to how he had better rouse Jensen, where to bring him, and how long the condition usually lasted with him. Mrs. Jensen answered his questions without change of position or voice, and in a moment he went out, followed by Christina. When the door closed behind them, a great wave of color swept over the woman's face and receded as quickly, leaving her paler than ever. Her eyes remained fixed on the door as though through its heavy timbers she saw, unmistakably at last, the tragedy of her life.

## CHAPTER VIII

Jensen was lying on the dirt floor of the new barn in a drunken stupor. The temperature outside was rapidly falling, and an icy wind blew in through the door-opening, which was not yet fitted with a door. But the false warmth of intoxication masked the danger to its victim, and Jensen seemed to be unconscious of the cold. Christina bent over to speak to her father, but Matts drew her away.

"You let me take care of him," he said, gently. "Go in and help your mother and I will call you if I need you."

Christina went reluctantly, listening anxiously, as she crossed the clearing, until the cabin door shut out any sounds from without. Matts tried to rouse Jensen and help him stand up, but the sound of his voice made the drunken man fighting mad, and he struck at Matts like a crazed person.

"What you doing in my house?" he shouted. "You keep away from my wife or I 'll kill you both!" In a frenzy of rage he kicked at Matts who was leaning over him. In the dark Matts could not fend off the attack, and Jensen's heavy boot made a deep cut on his cheek. As though for the moment satisfied, Jensen again sank into a stupor. Matts could feel the warm blood trickling down his face, but he wasted no time over his own hurt. If the brute would do that to a strong man, what would he not do to a weak woman and children? He felt round in the corner of the barn, where he remembered one of the men throwing some ropes that had been used in hoisting the logs. His hand soon fell upon a coil. With this

he tied Jensen's arms to his side and, in spite of his violent struggles, fastened his legs together. He himself was struck and clawed more than once, but Jensen's drunken strength was no match for his young vigor. When Jensen was safely bound, he seemed to quiet, and Matts lifted him on his back and carried him to the house.

Mrs. Jensen heard the steps on the snow and hurriedly opened the door. She fell back in amazement at the sight of Matts, his cap fallen off, his fair hair in wild disorder, his shirt sleeve torn, and blood running from the wound on his cheek, bearing on his back the bound body of Jensen, whose bloodshot eyes, half opened, seemed to be without power of seeing.

"Where shall I put him?" asked Matts, stooping a little at the door to get through safely with his burden. Mrs. Jensen pointed without a word to the bed, and Matts put Jensen upon it, pulled off his shoes, and tied his bound legs to the bedpost. Jensen snarled in protest, but the restraint upon his motions was acting like a soporific, and he was rapidly becoming completely unconscious.

The little boys, huddled on another bed, were watching in terrified silence, but Oscar and Christina stood near, ready to help at a gesture from Matts. When all was secure and Jensen perfectly quiet, Matts turned from the bed to see Mrs. Jensen looking, not at Jensen, but at him, with an expression of hopeless misery that wrung his heart.

"I think he will be all right now," he whispered, as if he feared to wake him.

"I do not care about him," she answered, glancing at the bound figure with utter contempt, "I do not care about myself. He can kill me if he wants to; but when you come to help us, see what he does to you!"

Matts put his hand to his face and looked at the blood that stained it.

"It will be well by morning," he said. "It hardly hurts at all."

"Let me wash the blood away," said Mrs. Jensen in an agitated whisper, hurriedly pulling some clean rags from a chest. In trembling haste she got some hot water from the stove and made Matts sit down while she washed the wound and sponged the blood from his face, which was rapidly darkening round the cut as a result of the bruising of the blow. Her touch was light and skillful. She laid the torn flap of skin back in place and tied a cloth over the wound to stop the bleeding. Christina hovered over Matts, who made no sound, with little moans of sympathy during the painful parts of the process.

"You 're a real doctor," said Matts in smiling praise when Mrs. Jensen had completed her work. "All the sick people in New Sweden will be coming to you."

"I worked for a doctor in Sweden," she answered in a low tone, "and I learned to do things for the sick."

Matts glanced up at her. That was the first word he or anyone in New Sweden had heard her speak about her life in the old country. There had been much head-shaking among the women over this silence, but her reserve was not to be broken by any efforts of theirs. Matts, though passionately eager to penetrate all the secrets of nature, was the least curious of human beings when the secrets of men and women were in question. His own intense inner life gave him a respect for that of others, and a reluctance to try to force a confidence.

"They will keep you busy if they know that around here," he answered, lightly. Then, turning to the bed from which came the sound of deep breathing, he said in a low voice, "He will sleep till morning now, and I

shall come back as soon as it is light and untie him. Don't you or Christina touch him until I come."

"No, you must not come back," said Mrs. Jensen, in a tense whisper. "You will have to walk all night to get home and back again at daylight."

But with a laughing denial and a manner that forbade further protest Matts put on his coat and went out into the cold, windy night.

He did not go far, however. He walked over to the small haystack in the middle of the clearing, and, taking a large armful of the hay, carried it into the new barn and threw it down in the corner least exposed to the wind. He groped round in the darkness until he found his cap on the ground near where Jensen had been lying. Then, wrapping himself in his coat and covering himself as well as he could with the hay, he prepared to watch out the night. At first he listened for sounds from the house, but the cabin soon sank into quiet and darkness, and only the wind, whirling round the building and blowing in through the imperfectly matched logs, was left to keep him company. He dozed part of the time, waking up suddenly at a particularly sharp gust, thinking he heard a woman's cry, and, after listening a short time, dropping off to sleep again.

As the first light of the winter morning, like the soft-footed ghost of a day, crept into the barn, he sat up, uncertain for a moment where he was. With memory came fresh anxiety. Would his interference last night simply mean more trouble for Mrs. Jensen and little Christina to-day? How could he explain to the sober Jensen what he had done to the drunken Jensen of a few hours ago?

He got up from his cramped position and walked out of the barn. The little cabin was still dark and the wind was blowing more gently against its side. He went to the shelter where the oxen were kept. The big creatures,

looking gigantic in the dim light, got slowly to their feet. They rested halfway up, on their knees for a moment, as if to make sure he was not just a part of their dreams, before they gave up the placid habit of the night. He brought in a great armful of hay and threw it in front of them. He watched them for a time as they pulled mouthful after mouthful of the sweet fodder from the top of the tossed pile and chewed it with slow dignity. He found a momentary relief from his burden of unhappiness in their indifference.

As the light became a little brighter and the pure cold colors of a winter morning began to touch the upper reaches of the sky like a tinted breath on a windowpane, he walked over to the house and stood near the door, listening for a stir within. Almost as though in answer to a signal, the door opened and Mrs. Jensen stepped out, closing the door gently behind her. She had evidently not undressed at all. Her hair was loosened and framed her face in soft waves. Matts was surprised at her look. Instead of the anguished face he had expected, her expression was luminous like the morning above their heads.

"I knew you would come," she said, her eyes fixed on his. "I knew you would not leave us unprotected if you could help it. Even if the blows fall, they will not hurt after this."

Matts looked at her as simply as she at him. Up from his heart welled in words the philosophy of a gentle life, wrought from the experience of kindly living.

"Nothing really hurts us inside," he said forcing his thought to expression in his intense desire to give comfort to this suffering woman, who seemed so inexplicably to turn to him, "if we can still believe that there is beauty and good in the world."

"I can always believe that now," she answered, a beautiful light in her eyes as they rested for a moment on his

face. Then she turned away, fumbling for the handle of the door like one who has suddenly wakened from a dream.

"We must go in," she said, hastily. "He may wake and find himself tied."

She led the way, stepping as lightly as she could, and closed the door softly as soon as Matts had followed her into the unlighted room. In a moment his eyes became adjusted to the semidarkness, and he saw that Jensen, lying in the same position in which he had left him, was beginning to stir a little. He went to the bed and bent over to untie the rope. Some of the knots in the struggle had become very tight, so that Matts took out his knife and cut them. The feet were quickly freed and the half-conscious man stretched them out as if in relief. The ropes round the arms were more of a problem, and Matts was compelled to turn Jensen over to untie the last of the knots. Jensen threw himself back on the bed as the rope fell to the floor, and stared as Matts, who was just straightening himself up, with quick anger.

"What you doing to me?" he said, in the blurred speech of the newly wakened. Then catching sight of his wife's apprehensive face, he added suspiciously, his eyes on Matts, "What are you and she hatching up? Are you trying to murder me and marry my widow?"

Mrs. Jensen stood like one turned to stone, her eyes never leaving Matts's face. Matts answered Jensen's angry question in the most quiet and matter-of-fact way, picking up the rope and tying the cut ends together as he did so. "The whiskey was a little too much for you, Jensen, as it was for some of the other men. I just tied you up and brought you in here so you could not hurt yourself or anybody else. That was pretty strong whiskey. Did Burghardt get it for you? He likes to get us Swedes drunk; then we buy more things from him and he gets rich. He 's a smart

man, that Burghardt, but next time I got whiskey, if I were you, I would not let him buy it for me."

As Matts spoke, Jensen lay on his back staring at him. He kept feeling his arms now and then, as if to assure himself that the ropes were no longer there.

Matts went on: "If you want me to help you get the door for the barn up and the oxen's stalls fixed, I can stay to-day as well as not. It looks to me as if it was blowing up colder weather, and the oxen would be glad to get in a warmer place. I just went out to give them some hay, and the wind, as it came in through that brush at the north, was making the hair on their necks stand straight up in the air."

Jensen pulled himself up on the bed. Mrs. Jensen had not stirred since he first spoke, but as he put his foot over the edge of the mattress and looked around for his shoes, she moved over to the stove and stirred up the fire. Some of the boys had waked and were dressing, furtively watching their father as they did so. Christina joined her mother, as her father got to his feet, and began to put dishes on the table for breakfast and to help the smallest boy to dress. Jensen dipped his head in water and smoothed back his heavy hair without speaking. He looked sick and he still staggered a little as he walked, but he drank some of the coffee left from the feast of the day before, which his wife offered to him, and seemed to revive. He gruffly told Matts he might stay and finish the barn.

Matts said nothing, and swallowed his disgust as best he could, comforting himself with the thought that the little family would be safer for the day if he were near. He ate his breakfast slowly, so that there should be no reason why he should leave the cabin before Jensen did. He lingered at his meal so long, indeed, that Jensen was finally compelled to go out himself in order to start him to

working. Jensen revived in the cold air and, although he did not work with his accustomed energy, he managed with Matts's help to make the barn tight and ready for the oxen by the middle of the afternoon.

All through the hours of work, while neither spoke a word, Matts pondered what he could say or do to protect the little household from the anger of its head after he had gone. He could think of nothing that would not make it worse.

The oxen were finally safely tied up in their new quarters, and there was nothing left for Matts to do but to turn his face homeward. As he passed the cabin lingeringly, he suffered the full agony of helplessness in the presence of wrongs that cannot be righted.

## CHAPTER IX

Spring came early that year, and Matts and his father toiled every hour of daylight to get the wheat sown. Nils was a careful farmer, and had ploughed and harrowed his fields in the fall. They were still rough, with partially burned stumps sticking up here and there, and the ground was not sufficiently cultivated to offer a smooth and easy surface for sowing, but richness was in the soil, ready to make an abundant return for the labor that was expended upon it.

The father and son spent long days like the patriarchs of old, sowing the wheat from bags fastened at their shoulders. On the edge of the field they had distributed seed bags, one bushel to each acre for the lighter soil on the upper slopes, but two bushels of the best seed for each acre of the rich soil in the bottoms. As Matts walked back and forth, replenishing his bag at each trip, he kept his eye alert for the choicest place to try out his prize ear of wheat. It must be in good soil, not too near the edge of the field where the trees might shade it, yet not so far out as to be lost in the mass and perhaps missed when the time to harvest it came round. He finally selected a spot and fenced it round with twigs to mark it off from the rest of the planting.

One morning he started out before his father, carrying the precious grains in his hands. The air was full of the music of the spring. Migrating flocks of birds twittered and fluttered along the way, and overhead the crows exchanged raucous calls, as though in eternal quarrel over

nothing. The birches shimmered in palest green, and a clear, delicate rose color hovered over the sugar maples, veiling the mysterious changes wrought by the running sap. Matts breathed deep breaths of joy in the beauty and fragrance of the season. No autumn, he thought, could be fuller of color than this rainbow month of April. The faintest stir of air touched his face, and his bare feet sank deliciously in the cool earth still moist from the night.

When he reached the roughly-fenced-in square, he removed the stakes along one edge and knelt to do the planting. No casual sowing for these seeds of promise! He scattered them with careful hand, distributing the kernels evenly over the surface. Then, using his own hand as packer, he pressed them well into the black and crumbly earth, in the safe darkness of which they could unfold the soft blades destined to push through to the sunshine above and the long roots which would reach down to the moisture below. After the grains were thoroughly covered, he stirred up the packed surface with a many-branched twig, that little tubes of evaporation might not so readily form and dry the earth around the sprouting grains. He replaced the guardian sticks, and stood a moment looking happily at his work. In a few days he might expect to see the first bit of green push up among the clods. This chosen piece of earth seemed to him to hold more meaning than all the rest of the great field stretching to the woods that edged the farm.

Through the long winter Matts had dreamed of taking part in the mysterious selection Nature had been making through the ages. She had all too clumsily chosen the puny seed which his father was to sow this very day. Now his own time had come. His spirit expanded as he lifted to his shoulder the big bag of wheat he was to sow and filled his hand with the pale saffron grains. He walked

across the field, scattering the seed as he went, his mind a happy tumult of ideas and hopes, to all of which the awakening life about him seemed a joyous, assenting chorus.

At the end of the week the planting was so well advanced that Matts could be spared to carry the eggs, which the hens had begun to lay with spring enthusiasm, to Burghardt's store. From there they would be shipped to St. Paul, and the Swenson account credited with a cent for each egg. Olga had told her mother in the morning that she was going to town with Matts.

All the morning Olga worked hard at the churning. She got Matts to help her with the heavy dasher when her mother was in the henhouse and could not interfere with such a wasteful misuse of a man's time. When Matts was ready to start, she had forced out the last of the faintly clouded water and patted and rolled the butter to Brigitta's satisfaction. Matts waited, adjusting the yoke on the single ox who was to draw their light load, until she had set the filled crocks on the shelf in the tiny cellar. Her mother followed her out to the cart, carrying in her hand a roll of the fresh butter, wrapped in a clean cloth.

"Give this to Mrs. Jensen," she said, handing it to Olga as she spoke. "Jensen told the Lindbloms that his cow is going dry and does not come in fresh for another two weeks. This butter will taste good to those little children."

Matts felt a sinking of the heart. He had not seen Mrs. Jensen, except an occasional glimpse from a distance when he went by on his weekly trip to the store, since the morning after the barn was built. She never went to any neighborhood gathering, and Brigitta, who dropped in to see her once or twice on her way to or from church, reported disapprovingly that she seemed a sickly woman, who did not care for sermons and was not interested in

learning how to cook new dishes. Matts always managed to be hurrying home on the days when Brigitta stopped for a visit, and in all his mother's report of what was said during her call there was never word or mention of himself.

He felt he should be thankful for that. Some of the things Jensen had said, scarcely heeded at the time, haunted his memory, and he felt he could do them all no greater kindness than by keeping away. He yearned, nevertheless, to know how things went with the little family to whom he had given such warm affection. Christina he saw at church, and he rejoiced to notice that she was growing more rugged as the spring advanced and that the pallor of her delicate face was beginning to take on a faint pink. But her father kept her close by his side, and Matts ventured nothing more than a smiling greeting.

The thought of Mrs. Jensen, carrying the double passion of hate and fear in her heart, stabbed him constantly. He tried to comfort himself by remembering that her struggle to pit the frailty of her body against the hardship of her life was like that of all the women among the pioneers. But he was sure the others had what she had not, some inner peace with which to meet the daily tasks. For her there seemed to be nothing but the dreary round of the days and the dull cycle of the years.

Matts and Olga rode along in the crude ox-cart, for the most part silent, though Olga shared Matts's love of the outdoors sufficiently to make their silence companionship. Now and then he pointed out to her the signs of early spring in the energetic weeds pushing up along the roadside. The Canada thistle and the mustard were getting ready to compete with the wheat and oats. Fortunately Nature was generous enough in these new clearings to allow the weeds and planted cereals to grow luxuriantly side by side. Matts neither worried nor rejoiced about the

crops. They were part of the accepted routine of life. But back in his mind was a steady glow as he thought of his tiny experimental plot. No weeds should be allowed to grow there. Those precious grains could not take their chance with mongrel seeds planted merely to raise a crop, for the harvest of their planting was to be the testing of an idea. What a happy world, where the seasons could promise such harvestings!

But his exultation died down as they drew near the Jensens'. "You take in the butter, and I will wait here in the road for you," he said to Olga as they stopped on the main road.

She looked at him in amazement. He was the only one in the family who thought for her and saved her lameness from extra strain, and here he was, asking her to do what would be only the work of a moment to his vigorous limbs! He flushed at her look as though he feared she was reading his secret thoughts.

"I 'll run in," he said, hastily, "and you can go ahead. I 'll catch you before you reach those black oaks by the road."

He jumped out from the slow-moving cart with the butter in his hand, and the ox went on without stopping. Olga looked after his running figure for a moment, then turned her face toward the store, just visible in the distance, with a little hurry in her breath. Was it only three weeks ago Karl had asked her to look in his fancy mirror? She had not seen him since, but there had not been a minute of her waking hours in which she had not felt the kiss he had given her when he praised the face reflected in the glass. He had promised then to come to the farm in a few days, to sell her father a new plough. She told him she had tried to make Nils buy a reaper, but he would not even listen. Karl had rewarded her with another kiss for wanting to help him. They had been standing in

the half-lighted back of the store, Karl's arm around her shoulder, at that second kiss. Matts came in just then with Burghardt from the grain shed, and Karl was forced to turn his back on Olga and wait on him. But the looks he managed to give her made her cheeks crimson and her heart beat with an excitement she could not easily conceal. That was three weeks ago. During all those days, although Olga had looked up at every sound and had found endless excuses to go out and scan the road, no Karl had come to the Swenson farm to sell a plough to the father and to steal kisses from the daughter. Olga was sick with hope deferred, and that morning, in desperation, had made up her mind she could bear it no longer.

Matts found the door of the Jensen cabin open to let in the sweet spring air. Mrs. Jensen was sitting close to the entrance, sewing on a child's garment. She looked up at the sound of his step, her face clouded like that of one habitually thinking unhappy thoughts. The change that took place when she saw him coming was a transformation. Matts, to whom fine shades of difference in the faces of human beings as well as in the aspect of Nature were matters of deepest interest, was startled by her look. It was like Christina, in a moment of sudden happiness, turning to him to double her joy by sharing it.

"How beautiful of you to come!" she said. She did not see the package in his outstretched hand. Her shining eyes never wavered from his face. "It has seemed a long time since I last saw you, but Christina tells me every week that you are well, so I don't grieve too much. I can't pray. I have n't prayed for many years — but if I could, I would ask God to bless you for what you have done for me."

Matts looked at her, unable for a moment to speak. He had noticed with surprise, from the first time he saw her, that she used words of affection and feeling that did not exist in the vocabulary of the men and women about him.

He had heard her speak to the baby with tender, caressing phrases that seemed to reveal a world of emotion different in quality from anything with which he was familiar. But there was a thrill in her voice to-day that unnerved him. He did not know how to respond.

For a moment he hesitated. Then he bent over her and said, simply, "I 'm not good enough for your prayers or for anyone's prayers, but I 'm glad if I 've made your life any easier for you. I 've kept away because I was afraid I might make more trouble for you. But if you ever need me, I shall be waiting for your call."

"You help me every time I look in your face!" she cried — then checked herself as she saw his agitated look. She stood up suddenly. "You have something in your hand. Is it for me?"

He handed her the butter in mingled relief and disappointment. The woman before him had something rich and fine to offer him, some glimpse of an inner life unknown to his experience, but an instinct deep within him forbade his reaching out so much as a finger to take it.

"My mother sent you this. She heard your cow was nearly dry and thought the children might like some butter on their bread," he explained, feeling the solid earth beneath his feet once more as he repeated the simple message.

She took it with a little smile, and said to him in her ordinary, friendly manner, "How kind your mother is! She 's like you. Give her my thanks. The children are with Olaf, planting in the field beyond the woods. They 'll jump with joy when I show them this, for they have n't tasted butter for a month."

Matts's only reply was a hurried word of Olga and the ox cart moving down the road. He started off quickly, but when a short distance away he turned to wave a more friendly good-bye. Mrs. Jensen was still standing, follow-

ing him with her eyes, and he saw that her face wore once more the look that had startled him, a brooding intensity of expression. As he ran out to the main road, he could not shake off the memory of that look. It asked nothing of him, it put no chains upon his free spirit, and yet it left him with the feeling that he carried a wounded creature with him wherever he went.

Saturday afternoon was a gala time in the little settlement of New Sweden, for that was the day for the farmers to bring in their eggs and other food produce, and to buy from Burghardt the few things they could not raise on the farm.

Matts stopped the cart across the road from the store, and helped Olga climb down over the big wheel. The day was warm, but Olga wore her woolen scarf carefully hung over her left shoulder. Her head was uncovered, and her abundant yellow hair shone in the bright sunlight. Her blue eyes and clear complexion gave her appearance all the charm of youth and, had there been any near her with eyes to see, the gentle melancholy of her face would have marked her out for distinction among the placid peasant types about her.

The store was filled with farmers and their wives. The men wore high boots which clumped as they walked, and their clumsy trousers and shirts were clearly homemade. The women were dressed in dark calico and some of them were barefoot. A few carried shawls to throw over their heads when outdoors, but these they folded across their shoulders while they were inside the building. Most of them were clustered round the dry-goods section, handling the materials, pricing them, and agreeing with each other about the poor wearing-quality of these American-made goods and their high cost. The men exchanged news of the planting and discussed the danger of a lean crop while they bought nails, fitted handles to their axe heads, or

tested the weight of some new wedges lying on the counter by balancing them idly in their hands. Three or four wandered out to the back sheds where Karl was busy demonstrating the superior quality of the ploughs and harrows he was offering for sale. They could hear him through the side door, which hung open, barking his wares afresh to each newcomer.

"Now look here, Lindblom, how many times have you brought that old harrow down here to be mended this spring? Three times? That 's what I thought. You ought to buy one of these harrows. The teeth never come out. Just see that bolt! It 's tightened so it can't get loose. Only thirty-five dollars! You could save the cost in one year, and you would n't have to spend all your time waiting for Larsen to stop horseshoeing long enough to mend the old one for you."

The circle of listeners was evidently being increased, for the voice went on in an even more decided key. "Hello, Johnson, so you 've come to get the plough, have you? Not sure yet? Now look here, Johnson," the manner became more than ever confidential though the tone was as loud, "I never said a word last fall when you ploughed in your rye stubble with that old plough of yours, but I told my uncle you were wasting your time. That high place needs to be ploughed deep, for the water drains off there early in the spring, and your plough is about as good as a comb for doing that. Yes, sir! I could take this comb out of my pocket and do as good a job as you did with your plough. But this Deerfield plough can be set to go as deep as you want it. It can go down as far as your oxen are strong enough to pull it. In Hennepin County the agent sold one hundred and forty-five of these in one month. They 've got American farmers over there that know how to make a farm pay. If the farmers round here don't get busy, they 'll think this county has nothing but a lot of

dumb Swedes that don't know what a good plough looks like."

Just then Burghardt came into the store from the back, with a bag of seed for one of his customers, and closed the door behind him, shutting out the enthusiastic salesman and his unmoved audience. Olga was standing beside the other women, all of whom knew and greeted her, but she had smiled at them without hearing what they said to her, so intent was she on every word from Karl that floated into the room through the door. How wonderfully he could talk! She did not see how a man with any sense could refuse to buy as Karl advised. When, a little later, Lindblom returned to the store, and, in answer to the joking questions of the others, confessed that he was going to stick to his old harrow another year, she was surprised. Lindblom was a duller man than she had thought.

Matts got credit for his eggs, bought the few articles his mother wanted, and stepped over to the post-office grille to ask for his mail. He had caught a glimpse of his agricultural paper. Burghardt was busy in another part of the room, so he went behind the counter and took it for himself. He seated himself on a convenient nail keg, opened the paper, and began to read. Though he was constantly brushed against by passing people and his ears assailed by uninterrupted talking, he was soon so absorbed as to be unaware either of where he was or of what he had come to do.

After the back door closed, Olga talked distractedly with the other women and tried to think of some excuse for going out into the yard, where, through the window, she could see the men unconcernedly loading seed grain into their wagons while Karl was doing his best to draw their attention to the shining farm implements, with their bright red painted frames and their decoration of fancy scrolls of gilt woven round the manufacturer's name. She

looked toward Matts for help, but she saw that he had forgotten her and everything else. In her desperation she had almost decided to go out and price a plough herself, but she shrank from the thought of the surprise she feared to see on the faces of the men, who would think ploughs certainly not a woman's business. Would they suspect that she had some other reason for coming than interest in a new tool for her father?

After half an hour, however, the crowd in the yard thinned and, as the last man got his grain and departed, Karl walked into the room. As soon as she saw him coming, Olga looked away, her heart beating with the frantic rhythm of a humming bird's wings. She tried to hold herself rigid, but when he came into the room she turned toward him as though moved by an invisible mechanism against which she was powerless. He did not see who she was for a moment, as he came in from the bright light outside, but her fixed gaze, among the indifferent backs and faces of the other people in the store, caught his attention.

"Hello, Olga," he called gayly. He walked up to her and said, reproachfully, "Why don't you ever come to the store any more? I have been hoping every day you would get down this way and make me happy. I don't look at anything from morning till night but these old fraus. Your pretty face is as good as a glass of beer to me."

Olga smiled a radiant smile. He had not forgotten her. The three weeks of unhappiness were gone in a flash.

"I thought you were coming to the farm to sell father a plough," she said, and added in a low voice, "I have looked for you every day."

"My little Olga," he said, squeezing her arm under cover of showing her some cotton goods, "I tried every day to get away, but this is a busy time for me. Did you

really miss me?" His last words were said with his lips so close that she could feel his warm breath on her cheek.

She flushed and looked at him, her lips trembling. "I cried every night because you did n't come. Every morning I was sure you would n't be cruel enough to stay away another day."

"Do you care as much for me as that?" whispered Karl. "I 'm going up by your place to-morrow, and I 'll be coming back a little before sunset. Could you meet me where the road goes over the brook, in your woods, at six o'clock? I can't talk here. Quick! Will you?"

His uncle was calling him to sort the mail, and an old woman who had just decided, after long and anxious thinking, to buy three yards of red cotton and a spool of thread, was motioning to him to wait on her. His insistent words drew an uncertain nod of assent from Olga, as he hastily picked up the bolt of cloth and stepped behind the counter. He measured out the cotton with his yardstick, apparently absorbed in the effort to be exact. When he was ready to cut the cloth, his customer was thrown again into a state of uncertainty as to the amount she really wanted, and she had to be forcefully reassured by the masterful clerk. Karl was in a pleasant glow of self-appreciation as he snipped the selvage and tore across the goods. He kept directing sly looks at Olga's glowing face as he folded the cloth and brought out the thread from a drawer behind him.

With a shy backward glance, Olga started toward the front of the store. His lifted eyebrows and smiling nod seemed to her excited imagination to say more than any words could. Her heart was at last full of a happiness that left no room for misgivings. She went up to Matts and touched his arm, reminding him that they must go. He reluctantly put his paper under his arm and stood up.

Burghardt was bent over the sugar barrel, scooping out

a pound of the tiny yellowish crystals which Johnson was taking home to sweeten the old grandmother's coffee. He called to Matts that he had put the German Bible in the drawer where the lumbermen's mittens were kept, and that the young man might take it home with him if he wanted it. Matts's face lighted with pleasure. He retorted with his usual quick wit to the jokes of the other men in the store at the idea of such taste in books. The few minutes he had been reading had taken him out of his everyday world and restored his calm. He was no longer the victim of conflicting impulses and moods, but his balanced self. He opened the drawer at which Burghardt pointed, and took out the big book. It was bound in old, brown leather, the leaves yellowing with age, and looked as if it might have served generations of Burghardts, both as a source of spiritual comfort and as a record of family births and deaths. Matts handled it reverently, and set it carefully in the straw-filled box in which the eggs had come. Olga picked up the two or three packages which represented the week's purchases, and they went together out of the door. She did not look again in Karl's direction, though she thrilled with the thought that he might be watching her go.

When the sound of their footsteps had died out, some of the loiterers by the hardware counter exchanged comments.

"Got queer ideas, that fellow has, about spending his time," observed one.

"Matts is a good worker when he works," suggested another, "but he likes to loaf. I went hunting with him at Mud Lake, last spring, when the geese were going north, and he gave up hunting almost as soon as we got to the lake. He found a duck's nest in a swampy place, where he could hide himself and watch the nest at the same time. And if you 'll believe me he sat there all day

in the sun, trying to see what those birds were doing. I told him he was crazy, but he did n't care. He just laughed and said it was a good place for a crazy man, so I left him. When I came back in the evening with a full bag, there he was, sitting in the same spot. He had n't killed a thing!"

"What 's he learning all these funny languages for?" asked Johnson. "Does he want to be a minister?"

"No," volunteered a severe man with a scraggly, sandy beard. "Matts is no better than an atheist. He told my boy Kurt that he does n't believe in Hell."

There was a solemn pause. Then the first one who had spoken made a significant gesture to his head.

"There 's where the trouble is," he said. "He 's a good fellow, but he 's not like the rest of us."

The matter seemed settled to the satisfaction of all, and the talk returned to the perennially absorbing topics of the weather and the crops.

As Olga disappeared, the old woman who had bought the cotton asked Karl, "Is that Nils Swenson's crippled girl?"

At Karl's nod, she went on, "She 's a pretty-looking girl, but she 'll have to die an old maid. No man in this country would be fool enough to marry a girl with only one good arm. Even two arms are not enough with all the work there is to do."

"I should say not," assented Karl, warmly. "Olga never had a beau in her life. She does n't care anything for the men, either. But they do say she 's a good butter-maker."

"Well, you can't live on butter," said the old woman, grimly. "I guess the men know what they are about."

She picked up her cloth and, feeling round in her voluminous skirt, found her pocket and slipped the spool of thread into its capacious depths.

"I suppose some day pretty soon you 'll be looking for

a smart German girl, to keep house for you," she said, watching Karl as he rolled up the bolt of cloth and put it on the shelf at his back.

Karl turned round with a laugh. "Not yet awhile," he answered, "but I 've got my eye on a pretty German girl in Blackbird that knows a real man when she sees one."

"Well, tell her to keep looking at you," said the old woman, with a crackling staccato in her throat, which was the nearest she could come to a laugh. When she started away, Karl took off his old straw hat which he wore in the store, and made a mock bow of thanks to her back. She walked haltingly out to the wagon at the side of the road, where her husband had been sitting half asleep in the sun, waiting until she should decide about the red cotton.

## CHAPTER X

THE next night, the simple supper at the Swensons' was finished and the dishes washed and put away, when Olga murmured to her mother something about going out to see how soon she might expect the strawberries to blossom. Her mother looked at her in some surprise, but as long as the evening work was done she offered no objection, even to such a foolish quest. When Olga started out, Matts and her father were busy in the barn, so she walked down the road unobserved. She had not dared to put on her best clothes for fear of comment, but she had slipped on a fresh dress before she ate her supper, on the plea that the other needed mending. Her mother, busy at the stove, had, to her great relief, paid no attention to what she said. Olga had washed the dishes, which was her mother's usual part of the evening work. She wanted her hands, which were darkened and discolored with the work in both house and barn, to be white and clean. She longed to be beautiful and perfect for this hour of happiness before her. Her failure to be frank with her mother gave her a feeling of uneasiness, but her sensitiveness shrank from the impact of words on the fragile beauty of her hopes.

There was a first suggestion of evening, dimming the radiance of the spring day, as she hurried along to the place of meeting. The air was full of perfumes, each whiff of which was rich in its suggestion of the yearly rebirth of a world. The song of the birds, to her exultance, was a chorus, chanting the eternal music of love. She forgot

her limp and seemed to walk on air. The exquisite notes of the meadow lark, full of the silvery purling of running waters and of the rich rapture of being, found a response in her which they had never excited before. She was startled to find herself throwing out her arms and crying, "Oh, you dear, beautiful world!" Her scarf fell from her shoulder and, as she stooped to pick it up, a sudden blackness, which seemed to darken the day, rose before her eyes. She stood up, trembling for a moment, then she rearranged the folds of the scarf and walked along more quietly. But when she saw the woods, through which the brook ran, just a short distance ahead of her, joy came back to her in a rush. Her heart beat so that she could feel its throb in the blood vessels on her firm white throat, and her breath came short and fast.

When she reached the little bridge of logs which carried the road over the stream, the place was solitary. She sat down on a projecting beam, her heart suddenly heavy within her. She tried to believe that she was early, but the sun, sunk behind the trees in the west, gave the lie to her hope. Beside the bridge, on one side, wheel tracks ran down from the road into the brook and back into the road on the other. Passing farmers sometimes, instead of crossing on the logs, drove their teams into the stream to water the animals. She noticed on the muddy margin the fresh marks of a horse's hooves, going north. Burghardt had one of the few horses in their neighborhood, and she knew Karl was allowed to drive it on his selling trips. It must be that he had gone by in the morning and had not yet returned. She settled down with renewed hope to wait.

The sun sank lower until the road was all in shadow. The stillness was vibrant with the songs of the birds, upon whom the waning light seemed to act as an inspiration. Down the road to the south Olga heard a repeated

screak, slowly growing clearer. She slipped off the log and ran into the woods, hiding herself behind a tree which was itself well shielded by underbrush. After what seemed an endless wait, she saw August Lindblom walking beside his oxen as they crossed the bridge. The animals were pulling a clumsy cart which August himself had constructed of a few sawed boards. The low wheels were made from cross sections of logs. They turned irregularly and moved bumpily along the ground, but they carried the load, and were easily replaced when they wore out. The scream of their turning on ungreased axles was the sound Olga had heard. From her hiding place she watched the cart, on which the mended harrow was insecurely balanced, go by, in her impatience feeling as if it would never pass. She kept listening for the distant beat of a horse's hooves, longing for the sound, but dreading to have Karl meet the oxen too near her shelter. No sound came to her waiting ear save the receding plaint of the cart, and she was left again to the untroubled silence of the green growing things about her, and to the musical calls of the birds to their mates.

The sun had just set when she heard with her straining ears — or felt through the earth under her feet, she was not sure which — a quick vibration that could only be made by the rapid trot of a horse shod with metal. In her excitement she ran out into the road, careless of who might see her. Yes, down the road was a moving blackness which was not shadow, but the density of real substance! She trembled with uncertainty as to what to do. But when Karl, in his light spring wagon, came to the bridge, she was standing on the edge of the road, waiting for him, her eyes like wells of light as she watched him coming. He jumped out with a shout of welcome and, holding his horse's bridle with one hand, put his arm round the shrinking girl and kissed her half-averted face.

"You 're my pretty girl, Olga," he said, his cheek resting against hers. "Just let me tie this horse in the woods where he can't be seen from the road, and then we can have a real talk."

Holding her hand in his, he led the horse into the woods and tied him to a tree. Then he turned to Olga, seized her in his arms, and kissed her face and her neck ravenously. At first she resisted, then yielded, almost fainting with emotion. She lifted her eyes to look at his face, and was frightened for a moment by what she saw there. But he closed her eyes with kisses and pressed his warm lips to hers in a long embrace that seemed to kill in her forever the memory that she was Olga the cripple, whom no one could love. She knew herself, instead, to be Olga the chosen, beloved of the most wonderful of men.

He murmured tender words, touching her hair and the soft curves of her shoulders with his hands, and crushing her to him until she was all a-tremble with excitement. He whispered in her ear, "Do you love me? I have loved you so long!" In the depths of her emotion she could not summon words to her lips. She was like a prisoned spring of passion, rising in a mighty flood. All the days of timid adoration, the nights of wistful dreams, were transfigured in this rush of overwhelming feeling. How beautiful he was, how tender! How could she ever have doubted that he would love her at last? She could have fallen at his feet and worshiped him. He had seen into her heart of love and knew that there was nothing crippled there—nothing but the glory of his image, which was beauty itself.

Her shrinking passed from her as a cloud from the face of the sun. She leaned against him, pouring out her love in kisses which seemed to sap the very sources of her life. The intensity of her giving created new emotion within her, until she felt like a leaf in the heart of a

tornado, blowing she knew not whither. They were lost in the thought of each other, the night enfolding them in its softness and its peace.

Suddenly the cry of a whippoorwill, so near that the little cluck between the notes, sharp like the closing of a tiny door, was distinctly audible, shattered the silence that encompassed them. The horse was startled and gave a quick jump. His rein held him, and he stood snorting a moment before he settled back to his quiet waiting.

Karl felt a quiver in the girl whom he held in his arms. He moved to draw her deeper into the woods, his arm close about her waist and his head resting on hers. The shock of the unexpected sound and the sudden change of position acted on Olga like a plunge into cold water. Her heart beat with a sharp fear both of him and of herself, and of the ends to which this terrible anguish of joy might lead her. He drew her through the dark, shielding her from the drooping branches and the tangle of undergrowth, until they came to a grassy, open place, glimmering in the early twilight. He threw himself on the ground and tried to pull her down beside him, but she drew back.

"No, no!" she cried, pushing his covetous hands from her. "I must go! It is late — I waited too long at the bridge. They will not know at home where I am. I must go!"

She repeated the last words almost as if she were pleading with a sick child from whom she must tear herself away. "Dear, dear Karl, I must go!"

He answered in a voice as sharp as a whiplash. "So that is as much as you love me! You get me mad with love for you, and then you have to go home because it is getting late! I don't want such a poor love as that."

"Oh, Karl," she whispered, as if the woods had ears to hear her, "I love you so much, you can never know. Do

not be angry with me or I shall die of grief. But let me go now. I am afraid."

He jumped up at that, and put his arms around her again.

"Now are you afraid?" he whispered, putting his hand on her fair hair and pushing back her head so that he could see her face. Her eyes, aglow with love light, seemed to give him the answer, but as he bent to kiss her quivering mouth she suddenly burst into a passion of tears.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, trying to wrench herself away from him. "I must go! I do not want to stay."

"All right! Go!" he almost shouted, in a quick change of mood, pushing her from him so roughly that she stumbled and nearly fell. "I 'm not going to waste my time with a girl that does n't know how to love."

"Do not say that, Karl," she sobbed. "You 'll break my heart. I don't know what is the matter with me to-night. Perhaps some other time I can be happier, if you 'll forgive me now."

She shrank away from him and started finding her way out of the rapidly darkening wood. Karl sullenly followed her, but offered her no help in the hindering brush through which she had to push. When she was once more on the road, she stopped and faced him, still some distance behind her.

"I am going now," she said, timidly. "Will you try to forgive me, and love me still?"

He did not answer, and she took a few steps along the road toward home, when she heard him running behind her. Suddenly his arms went round her, and his cheek was pressed against her cheek, wet with her tears.

"Olga, Olga," he said, softly, "come back and be my little love. You cannot leave me now. You will never be happy again."

She trembled as though hearing for the first time the words of her own fate.

"I know it. I do not want to be happy. I cannot be happy," she said, the dull note of lost hope in her voice.

"Not when I kiss you?" he whispered, his cheek on hers.

She did not resist his embrace, but her arms hung inert at her side. Some spring of certainty within her seemed broken. Like one ready to hold the sword for her own destruction, she said, in a voice without expression, "Stand off and look at me. Have you forgotten that I am a cripple? No man can love me."

Karl's arms loosed their hold. In the hot tumult of his own passion, he felt the chill of tragedy in this girl whom he had hoped to have for his light-o-love. Ready of speech as he usually was, his tongue stumbled over his words. "Oh, Olga, you 're a fine little girl," he managed to say, but the upsurge of feeling was gone, and she knew as well as he that the tide of emotion, responsive to mysterious and unseen forces, had ebbed, and that her way home was now plain before her feet. She stood a moment like a creature wounded to death, then walked along the road, her hands outstretched a little before her as if groping for the path.

Karl made a hurried remark about getting his horse, and disappeared into the woods. He soon overtook her, and, stopping, asked her to get in the wagon and let him drive her home. He did not catch the words of her reply, but she did not stop. Instead, she walked steadily on, along the dark, grassgrown margin of the road, giving him space to pass. He whipped up his horse and went on, calling an inaudible good-night as the rested animal trotted briskly past the dim figure in the shadow of the trees.

All through the long ride to the little town, between dark fields and darker forests, that bent figure seemed to flit along the road beside him, more mysterious with each

advancing mile. Karl had an uneasy sense of having stumbled into an adventure for which his previous experiences had not fitted him.

"Lucky thing for me," he said to himself, "not to get tangled up with a crazy girl!" Gradually his pulse quieted and Olga's image was replaced by the vivid memory of the plump little German girl in Blackbird who made such fine pretzels and who knew how to give as good a kiss as she got.

When the wagon had passed her, Olga stood still as long as she could see its movement or hear the sound of the horse's feet. Then she threw herself on the ground, clutching at the tender grass under her hands like one drowning in grief. She did not weep, but her anguish welled to her lips in broken phrases, the heritage of long years of churchgoing and the fresh creation of heartbreaking experience.

"Oh, God, help me to bear it! Why should I suffer like this — just because I loved him! He did n't really love me — it was n't his fault — how could he love me — I am so different from other women! Dear God, save me from dying of grief! I have obeyed all your commandments. Why are you punishing me?"

As though driven by a sudden impulse beyond her control, she sprang to her feet and ran stumbling down the road after the vanished wagon, calling out to Karl and begging him to come back to her. She would be all he wished if he only would not leave her! But the quiet woods gave back no answer, and the stubborn earth slowed her hurrying feet to a broken and halting pace. She stood for a terrible moment, looking down the long cleft between the trees which marked the path of the road. At its end the Milky Way dipped beneath the horizon in a little mist of stars. She was to be an old woman before the memory of that picture would lose its power to make her suffer.

She walked on blindly, following the dim wheel-tracks. Waves of grief swept over her which made the burden of carrying herself seem more than her frail strength could bear. As she came out from the woods, near her home, the tender light of the crescent moon spread a faint surface like a breath of fog over the open fields. At her left stood the farm buildings, dark against the silvered grass. The long barn and the low cabin, with the lamplight shining from one window, seemed to cling together for company in the wide waste of the sleeping world. The haystack, a ragged remnant of its original shapely arch, kept guard between the two.

Olga smoothed her hair and her dress in an effort to remove any appearance of disorder which would attract attention. Her only thought was to hide her misery from those about her. The instinct that drives wounded wild creatures into hiding was driving her. She would suffer, as she had loved, in the secret places of the heart. The consolations and the healings of a shared grief could not be hers. They were foreign to her experience and to that of the austere people among whom she lived.

As quietly as she could she opened the door of the cabin and slipped in. She turned her back to the light as soon as her foot was over the threshold on the pretense of fastening the door securely behind her. Her father and mother were already in bed, and Matts was sitting by the lamp in the middle of the room, reading.

Brigitta only waked sufficiently to ask, "Where have you been all this time? I should think you must have been picking berries instead of counting how many there were going to be!" Then, at Olga's, "I forgot how long it would take me to walk home," she went back to sleep again.

Matts looked up from his paper, but Olga had her back to him and he saw only that her dress at the bottom was damp with the light dew of the early evening.

"Did you notice the moon?" he said, speaking in a low voice so as not to disturb the sleepers. "Do you remember that poem we had in the school reader — 'the young moon with the old moon in her arms?' I certainly saw it to-night when I was putting the cows out in the pasture."

Olga gave a smothered assent, and busied herself undressing. Matts thought she must be tired from a long walk, and turned back to his reading. She got into her bed and lay there rigid, her face to the wall. The hours passed, but until the morning light came through the window and Brigitta called to the family that it was time to get ready for the work of the day, she neither turned nor moved.

## CHAPTER XI

One morning, late in July, Matts came out of the barn to look anxiously at the sky. His work had begun long since, by the light of the paling stars, but, like all those who live by the weather, he could not be sure of his plans until he had read the prophecy for the day spelled out by the rising sun. The sun hung, tawny, just above the trees, and the clear pale blue of the heavens ran from horizon to horizon without a hint of cloud upon its surface. A wind was blowing, which, even at this early hour, was hot and dry.

Matts's thoughts turned to his little plot of wheat, so defenseless against the whims of the weather. The season was perfect for filling out the corn, but the long-continued drought and the wind, which fanned away such little moisture as the roots were able to bring up from their tips, deep in the ground, were serious menaces to the wheat. Of course it would be possible to water the tiny plot. A pailful would be enough. But the king of wheats must be able to endure hot winds and to find its own water. He withheld his hand. Yet he fretted and worried like an anxious mother disciplining her children for their own good.

If the wheat survived this summer and had still such heads as last, it would be the bearer of a seed worthy of experiment. Matts thought of the mountain in Syria where the parent grass was growing, unchanged from the earliest dawn of history. Its stalks were probably still food for the goats of the peasants, and its seed the main dependence of the birds of that country. But Matts

felt only impatience at the idea of such monotony. His imagination, quickened by the hopes and dreams of his first humble planting, looked for the meaning of life in growth and change. Man did not need to accept the world as he found it. He held plastic nature in his hand to mould to his purposes. Matts drew a long breath of exultation at the thought. He was eager for the seasons to come quickly to speed up this slow process of alteration. But meanwhile let him be thankful that there were the tasks of living to be performed, for they helped the time to pass.

To-day he was to go some distance from home. The water in the house was almost used up, the barn trough was empty, and the stream from which the farm got its water in ordinary seasons was dry. Matts regretted more than ever that he and his father had not last fall dug the well they had been talking of for years. This was the first time their supply had entirely failed so early in the summer, but unless they found some other source of supply it probably would not be the last. Matts was carrying barrels this morning to Turtle Lake, to bring back water for both the human beings and the animals.

He had put three empty barrels on the wagon and was starting for the fourth one, which stood beside the back door, when Olga stepped out of the house, carrying in her hand a pail of scraps for the chickens. He had noticed how languid and delicate she looked of late, but he felt a shock as he saw her in the harsh light of the morning sun.

"Olga, are you sick?" he cried, going to her impulsively and taking the pail from her hand. "You must make your big brother carry such heavy loads."

She flushed painfully as she had begun to do of late at any personal allusion, but she yielded the pail to him with a breath of relief.

"No, I 'm well. It 's just the heat," she answered, her color fading. Then she added, as if the words were forced from her by his air of anxious concern, "Don't worry about me, Matts, I 'm not worth your caring."

Matts's quick tenderness for any suffering welled up into speech.

"Dear Olga," he said, putting his free arm across her shoulder, "I can't let you talk that way about my sister. I think she 's the nicest girl I know." He bent down to look at her with a half-playful smile of affection.

She gave a sudden sob, as though stabbed in the heart. Then she pulled herself together and turned her back, struggling for self-control. Matts felt the same pang he had suffered when he saw Mrs. Jensen's misery. Were these poor women all destined to sorrow? What could be the matter with Olga? Was it possible that women did not feel the joy in life, the thrill of experience, that stirred in him from morning to night? Were they, instead, so crushed by hard work that they had no energy left for happiness?

He did not try to force Olga to turn her averted face toward him, but he said, gently, "Don't forget, Olga, that you have a brother. Perhaps some day you will tell me what troubles you. You always say I know a lot, and I might know enough to help you."

She did not answer, for fear of still further losing self-control. Sympathy had always been the hardest thing for her to bear. She had fought it off from childhood as if she knew that to her it would bring nothing but weakness and despair. No one, not even her mother, knew how the sensitive child had struggled to bear her deformity without complaint. The barrier of silence she had erected against them all had left her defenseless and alone in the presence of this disaster to her deepest affections. Even Matts, kind, loving Matts, could not help her now.

She reached out a hand and touched his as if in sign of her affection, and then walked off toward the little fenced-in garden where she and her mother raised such few vegetables as they had. She stood looking at the white potato blossoms and the waving carrot tops through a mist of tears. The passing days did not seem to bring her any peace. As she looked forward to the years ahead, she saw no end to her longing and her grief. Not since that April evening had she seen Karl, nor heard any except chance reference to him. He had gone to Blackbird, so they said, to sell harvesting machinery to the farmers in that neighborhood. Until she had heard that, Olga had not been able to go to church without a constant fear of fainting in his presence. She felt as if she could neither bear to see him, nor go to places familiar to them both without seeing him. Her whole nature was like an open wound, the stab to her roused emotions and the unhealing sore of her loss of belief in herself combining to torture her.

She wiped away her gathering tears, and, bending over the rows of beans, pulled a weed here and there and stirred the dry soil round the roots. The activity seemed to quiet her, and it was not long before she was steadied enough to venture back into the house where she would be under her mother's watchful eye.

Matts was just yoking the oxen to the wagon as she returned. He looked at her, affection and anxiety in his face. Her expression did not change, but her eyes rested on him for a moment as if they found comfort there. Then she stepped in at the open door, and Matts climbed up on the wagon for the slow ride to the lake. He had placed under the box which he used as a seat his latest farm paper and the German Bible Burghardt had lent him. He was reading the huge volume with a zest that did not find a dull line in its hundreds of pages. The

days of water-hauling were a golden time for Matts. On those prolonged trips he could indulge his passion for reading without misjudging eyes beside him or pangs of conscience within.

When he had the oxen started down the straight road to the north, he opened at a chapter of Job where he had put a long straw as a bookmark, and read slowly, enjoying the sonorous quality of the words, so like the beauty and dignity of the English translation which the teacher at the school had let him read. Fortunately, his familiarity with the Bible in English and Swedish made a German dictionary, which was unobtainable, unnecessary, and he read easily and understandingly. But in spite of his absorption he was quick to look up at any unusual sound beside the road, and to scan the fields to see if any wheat stood higher or was heading better than his.

As he went by the Lindblom farm, August and his father were repairing a pasture fence which ran along the road, and he stopped a moment to speak to them. They could talk of little but the weather. Lindblom was discouraged and did not hope for more than eight bushels of wheat to the acre unless a change should come soon. August was more hopeful, but he thought twelve was the most they could expect. They would not have to haul water for a while yet, for their well was fortunately not yet dry. After exchanging a few words, Lindblom went back to his fence posts, but August lingered, his bare brown foot, dusty with the dry dirt of the road and field, resting on the hub of the wheel, as he leaned over, curious to see what Matts held in his lap.

When August went back to his work, his father asked, "What was Matts doing, all bent over on that box?"

"He was reading the German Bible," answered August, with a laugh. "Old Burghardt lent it to him. He reads it all the way to the lake and back again."

Lindblom grunted. "Swenson 's got hard luck. Only one boy, and him cracked. When Matts was young, he was so tall and strong I thought he was going to be a smart lumberman and make big money in the camps. But I guess he 's turned out to be no good."

August protested. "Matts is all right. He 's a good fellow. He does n't run round after the girls anyway. You ought to like that," he added, smiling slyly at Lindblom. August was very popular with the girls, and spent time with them when his father thought he ought to be at work. Lindblom made no reply. He set a newly-cut post in the hole August had dug, with an air of having no more time for foolishness.

In the middle of the day, when the hot sun was blazing down on a parched and silent world, Matts reached the lake. The tiny oval lay in a glare, softened round the edge by the straight, dark-green reeds that grew up from the muddy bottom and encroached each year a little more on the clear water in the centre. On one side a pasture ran down to the lake, and four or five cattle lay near the shore under a tree, chewing their cud and drowsing through the hot part of the day. The flies seemed to be the only creatures still actively alive. They buzzed round the animals, lighting, flying up, and lighting again, apparently indifferent alike to swishing tails and shaking heads.

Matts drove the oxen as close to the lake as it was safe for the wagon to go, and let them drink. They stood with their forefeet sinking in the mud along the margin and their wide-open nostrils breathing lightly, as they drank deep draughts of the sun-warmed water. When they seemed satisfied, he turned them round so that the wagon could be backed down to the edge. From the inside of one of the barrels he took a pail, and stepped into the water, his feet bare and his overalls rolled to his

knees. As he walked out, bending the reeds to one side to clear the way, some small turtles, sunning themselves on a half-submerged log, slid into the water with a hardly audible splash. As though in helpless search for them, two dragon flies, with bright, metallic bodies and transparent, vibrating wings, hovered over the log, rising, and sinking, and darting off suddenly, only to return again. Finally they flew toward the shore, resting here and there on tall reeds which swayed and trembled under their light weight and sprang upright again when they had gone.

Matts dipped his pail and carried water to the wagon until the four barrels had as much as they could hold on the jolting ride back to the farm. Then he took off his clothes and waded out to the deeper part of the lake where it was possible to swim. Matts's swimming was the clumsy, ineffective kind not uncommon among country boys who learn the art in the swimming hole; but he could stretch his long limbs luxuriously, and felt refreshed by the soft flow of the water over his bare skin.

As soon as he had dressed, Matts went back to the wagon and, wrapping the Bible in a piece of burlap, laid it in the box which he had fastened above the barrels, to be out of the way of splashing water. He had covered the barrels with some wide boards, in order to hold in as much of the precious fluid as possible, and when the wagon was safely started, he jumped up and sat on one of them.

The cattle in the pasture lunged awkwardly to their feet as they saw the oxen move, and leisurely followed the wagon's progress along the fence which ran beside the road. After it had passed and the dust of its going had settled back to the earth, they still stood in the same place, their heads hung over the rails and their mild gaze

fixed upon the vanishing wagon and its thumping, gurgling load.

With his farm paper in his hand and his feet dangling over the edge of the barrel, he bent his body to shade the printing from the full glare of the sun, that he might read with greater ease. He read everything: contributed poems; answers to questions from farmers' wives; topics in season; recipes for custard pie; spavin cures; the care of the hen yard; improved ways of churning butter; harness repair; creosoting fence posts; marketing garden truck — all were of absorbing interest to him. On the last page he saw the heading, "Darwin Again." He crooked his arm hastily to shut out the sunlight from that paragraph, as he leaned over to read what it said.

In small print under the heading was the title, "Cross Fertilization." Matts read with breathless attention the few simple sentences that followed: —

The crossing of plants which are not closely related to each other is highly beneficial or even necessary, and interbreeding, prolonged during many generations, is injurious. With old established plants it is an almost universal practice occasionally to make exchanges of seed by which means individuals which have been exposed to different conditions of life will occasionally be introduced into each district.

His eye dropped to the final conclusion: —

Selection only improves; crossing changes the quality.

He realized instantly that this was the word for which he had been waiting. Like a flash came the memory of a chance remark of his father's about the wheat which Sorensen, his boyhood neighbor in northern Sweden, raised on the slopes of the mountain in his native village.

Nils had told Matts how early his grain ripened — earlier by several days than that of the farmers in the valley below. As a boy he had often helped Sorensen get in his crop, for it was ready to be harvested days before Nils was needed for the harvesting on his father's farm. Matts had seen crops in the country about New Sweden ruined only a day or two before the grain was ready to cut, by storms which lodged the tall growth, or by hailstones which beat the laden straw to the ground and broke and destroyed the spikes. He knew what even a few days' earlier ripening would mean to the wheat-growers of Minnesota. His father had told him that, though Sorensen always got a good crop, the flour was dark, and the city people would not buy it. They wanted white flour, like that ground in the American mills and sold all over the world. Matts was sure that the little village back in Sweden knew nothing about the French Perrigault's invention of the purifier, which separates the branny particles from the middlings and the flour, and allows the spring wheat of the far northern countries to compete with the winter wheats of more favored climates. The miller at Red Falls had told Matts that story the last time he had taken his grain to be ground. The color of the flour from Sorensen's wheat would present no difficulty to a modern miller.

But that early maturing! Matts could not put it out of his mind. If he could cross his heavy grains, rich in nutriment, with the early-ripening wheat, he could grow a seed that not only would feed the world but could not fail one year in fifty. His heart beat with the thrill of that possibility. Crossing and selection! One to bring into being the new quality, and the other to preserve the best that comes!

He could hardly wait to reach home, where he could learn from his father whether Sorensen still lived. He

would ask Nils to write to his old friend on the mountain and ask for seed. The slow pace of the oxen, which had seemed too fast for him at times when he was lost in his reading, now became an unbearable crawl. He got off the wagon and walked impatiently beside it. He wondered whether the changes from the grass of Mount Hermon to the wheat of to-day had not been due to unnoted crossings in the multitudes of maturing plants growing together through the generations. He could see in a flash that centuries of selection would be needed to accomplish what one lucky crossing could do in a year.

When Matts finally turned in at the farm, he made no start to take down the barrels, but shouted to his father, who had come out from the barn to help him unload. His breathless questions about Sorensen and his mountain wheat made Nils begin to fear that the heat of the long ride had affected the boy's head. But when Matts was assured that Sorensen still lived, and had been reported in good health in the last letter from home, he went back to his work with a will.

That night, under a lamp beset by moths and insects which flew in at the open window from the outer darkness, he wrote a letter to Sorensen, which Nils signed. The next morning he walked the sixteen miles to Burghardt's and back in order to start the letter on its way to Sweden before another sun should set. When that was done, he could settle back more patiently to the endless toil of the days, made bearable by daily visits of inspection to the experimental plot.

In that little square, the spikes on the tall stalks waved lightly in the moving air, and the tiny kernels, filled to bursting with a rich, milky substance, expanded day by day as though making ready to fling off the hold of the delicate glumes which embraced and sheltered them.

## CHAPTER XII

The harvesting had come and gone, and Matts's small bundle of wheat was safely hidden in the barn. The yield in the Swenson fields was poor, — twelve bushels to the acre was the best, — but Matts's heart swelled with pride every time he looked at his stored treasure. Those great spikes, heavy with rounded kernels, would certainly return not less than thirty bushels an acre to the man fortunate enough to have the planting of their seed.

He had told Olga about his wheat — not that he hoped for much response, but because he felt a tender urge to fill the emptiness of her heart with the sense that he shared his deepest enthusiasms with her. She had looked at the ripening grain with him, and had smiled at his glowing picture of the wheat that he was going to create in the coming years. But she thought his interest just a part of the strangeness that made him different from those about him. She was fighting a passion in herself so fierce and vital that Matts's talk of seed improvement seemed to her as unreal as the fading figures of a dream. But the little confidence brought the brother and sister closer together, and for a few days after their visit to the wheat Olga moved about her work with a lighter step.

In the early days of the settlement at New Sweden, the farmers had threshed and winnowed their grain by hand, but two years ago Burghardt had bought a threshing machine and the farmers were paying for its use with a percentage of their threshed wheat. Several of the men went from farm to farm, helping run the thresher and

thus earning the service of the machine for their own crops. Matts was one of these, and Jensen, though he was not yet able to raise grain enough to pay for the use of the thresher and still leave anything for himself, was earning some money by allowing his oxen to be used in turning the wheel that supplied power to the machine.

One day early in October, Burghardt sent word by Oscar Jensen that the next morning the thresher would reach the Swenson farm. There was immediately great excitement and activity on the part of Brigitta and Olga. To feed the ten or twelve men of a threshing team was no light task, and needed preparation. They had already made cakes and cookies, a big crock of cottage cheese, some wild-plum preserves, and a row of American squash pies, and had put them away in readiness for the expected day. The men would probably be able to finish in one day by working as long as it was light enough to see, but that would mean at least two meals to be provided. The women had to be prepared for a third meal in addition, on the chance that the threshing crew might spend the night in their barn and have to be given an early breakfast before they moved on the next morning.

The next day, before sunrise, four oxen came down the road dragging the big, rattling threshing machine, its exposed metal parts rusted by the weather and its red paint dimmed by the fine dust of the threshing. At its back the slatted straw-carrier stuck up above the rest of the machine, jerking and swaying as the wheels bumped over the uneven surface of the road. The Swensons stood in the yard watching the approaching procession. Jensen and Oscar walked at the head, guiding the oxen. Johan Olson, who was the best mechanic of the neighborhood, stayed close to the machine to see that no injury came to the working parts as it was dragged along. A wagon, drawn by two horses, brought up the rear. It carried the frame and

cogwheels of the power mechanism and the men of the crew, who, wedged in uncomfortably between the different parts of the machinery, apparently preferred the chance of being hit by the sweeps to the exertion of walking in the dusty road. Olga, who had been watching breathlessly since the oxen first came in sight, saw, even while they were still some distance down the road, that the horses were driven by Karl.

She ran into the house on the pretext of putting wood in the stove, but, once inside, she clung to the posts of her bed where she could not be seen from the road, and stared, rigid, at the wall in front of her.

"What is he coming for? What does he want?" she whispered. "I thought he was in Blackbird. Oh, what shall I do? If I could only hide! He 'll see in my face that I love him still. He 'll know that I can never be happy without him!"

She heard the sharp calls of Jensen as he turned the oxen into the yard, and the rumble and rattle of the clumsy machine as it went slowly past the door toward the grain stacks by the barn. The wagon, with Karl in the driver's seat, followed close behind. She could hear Karl talking to Nils in a loud voice that was audible above the tumult of their advance, but he did not look toward the house. She breathed more easily for a moment; then a sick dread of the hours before her turned her faint. She sat down weakly on the edge of the bed. Just at that moment her mother came in, full of interest and activity.

"You can't rest now," she said, looking disapprovingly at Olga. "We 've got lots to do to get everything ready for their dinner at eleven."

Olga went back to her interrupted task of washing potatoes, to add to those already heaped in the big kettle at the back of the stove.

"Johan Olson's got the job tending the machine,"

Brigitta went on. "Did you see Karl Burghardt on the wagon? He got back from Blackbird yesterday, and he 's come along to-day as boss. I don't know what his uncle is thinking of to let him do it. Karl does n't know anything about machinery except to talk about it. He can do that about everything. If Johan does n't look out, Karl will break the thresher to pieces."

Brigitta was unusually talkative in the excitement of this crowning event of the farmer's year, and did not notice Olga's silence. The cabin was filled to overflowing with her bustling activity and her excited comments. Through it all Olga sat silent, washing potatoes as if her mind held no other interest. But her thoughts were in a feverish whirl.

How could anyone say such things about Karl? Did she alone know how wonderful he was? It was because he was so much above the other men about him that he could not love her. How could he really care for a crippled, useless creature like herself, when the most beautiful girls in a big place like Blackbird would bless him for looking at them? She could never hope to have all his love. Did she want anything less? She could not answer her own question, so steeped was she in the dark melancholy in which her days were passed, and so torn with the long anguish of separation.

The thresher was being rapidly got ready. It was dragged into position and the wheels fastened together so that they would not shift when the belt began to turn. The power machinery was dismounted from the wagon and anchored to the ground by stakes and chains. The four great sweeps were set in their sockets, and the oxen that had dragged the thresher, and the Lindblom, Johnson, and Swenson oxen in addition, were driven up to be yoked to them, ready with the pull of their heavy bodies to supply the power for separating the kernels of wheat

from the straw and enveloping chaff. They stood patiently in place, waiting the signal to begin their long hours of travel in the endless circle which would be marked out by their spreading hooves.

Nils had decided to stack his straw near the door of the barn where it could be easily reached when he wanted bedding for his animals during the winter. Under his direction the straw carrier was let down in the centre of the place he had chosen. Meanwhile Johan was busy doing the final oiling of the machinery. He lifted little wooden trapdoors here and there, and brushed aside dust and chaff as he peered into the dark interior. He inserted the long nozzle of his can in oil cups, sprayed a stream of the slow-flowing yellow liquid on sprockets and shaft-bearings, and ran the tip leisurely over linked chain-gears.

The sun was well above the horizon, herald to a perfect Indian-summer day, when Jensen, who had charge of the animals, was given the signal for the start. He and Oscar ran round the circle, shouting to the waiting oxen, and using a goad when they did not respond quickly enough. The powerful creatures, with their wide-spreading horns lowered, pressed forward, and the sweeps yielded to the irresistible pull of their great muscles. The central wheel began to turn. The first cog folded slowly over its opposing rundle, and the next one clicked sharply as it fell into place. The bar rotated quietly, the belt, at first barely moving, caught up speed, and in a few moments the throb and din of the threshing, with its high, singing whirr blending all the other noises, was at its height.

Adolph Johnson and Johan's two brothers, Ole and Peter, walked back and forth from the grain stacks by the barn to the machine, carrying the bundles to be threshed. August Lindblom and Nils stood just back of the inclined chute, on a little slatted platform, ready to feed the bundles into the machine as they were brought to them.

The thin boards vibrated without ceasing under the two men, and the chaff and dust, hovering over the endless straw-carrier, drifted in their direction and settled on them until they looked like huge pollinated insects. The sheaves were tossed to them in rapid succession. With quick slashes of their knives they cut the straw bands, spread out the bundles, and pushed them, head first, down the chute. The radial arms of the skeleton cylinders snatched up the golden masses as they slid within their reach, and whirled back again, outstretched and empty, as if asking for more.

Matts stood at the side of the thresher, holding an open bag under the grain spout, down which poured a ceaseless stream of gold. As soon as one bag was filled, Matts pushed in the shutter of the spout and stopped the flow, while Gustaf Lindblom, August's father, pulled the full bag out of the way, tied the top securely, and dragged it to a rapidly mounting pile halfway between the house and the barn. Matts slipped another bag into place, opened the spout, and the rush of tiny grains, in an endless race to pass each other, began again.

As the straw stack mounted higher, the carrier was lifted, little by little, and Karl climbed the dusty, irregular pile, a pitchfork in his hands, to keep the moving slats free from impeding masses of the dry stiff stalks. The dust on the top was suffocating, and he soon came down again to walk around, a critical eye on the work of the others. Occasionally, when he saw that the straw was piling unevenly and threatening the smooth working of the slats, he mounted the stack again, and spread out the straw a little more or shifted the position of the carrier.

As the morning advanced, the heat of the day began to affect the workers. The unresting speed of the machine kept the men moving under high pressure, and their faces, grimy with dust and grease, were streaked with sweat.

In the shade of the barn stood a can, with a dipper hanging beside it, full of the mixture of water, vinegar, molasses, and ginger, so long accepted in the harvesting fields as the most refreshing drink for a crew at work in the hot sun. One or another of the men seemed to be always dipping into the can. Matts noticed, however, that Jensen never came near the barn. Instead, with greater and greater frequency he left Oscar in charge of the oxen, and went over to the wagon where he had a dark-colored jug hidden under a coil of ropes. Matts saw Oscar shrink now and then when his father spoke to him after one of the trips, and he watched the two uneasily when he had a moment to look up from his own work. Once he saw Jensen trip over the revolving bar on his return from a longer stay than usual at the wagon.

"He 'll hurt himself if he does n't look out," thought Matts. "Threshing machinery is n't safe for a man whose head is n't steady."

The morning wore on. Fifty bushels were added to the pile each hour, and it began to seem as if the unceasing racket and the regular, automatic motions of the men and the machine might go on forever. But at eleven o'clock Brigitta came to the threshold of the cabin, beating on a pan with a stick. The sound was hardly audible above the noise by the barn, but one of the men had chanced to glance toward the door, and he signaled to Jensen. Oscar, with the help of his father, slowed the oxen, pair by pair, and finally stopped them all. The wheel went on a cog or two and stood still. The clatter and hum of the machine died down, one noise after another coming suddenly to an end. The men at the stack, bending over to lift fresh bundles, straightened up without touching the sheaves, and the feeders laid their knives down with the bands half cut. Matts and Johan alone stayed at their posts — Matts to receive the last trickle of the grain, and Johan to

uncover the cylinders and search for the source of the ominous rattle which he had been hearing for the last few minutes.

The hot and dirty men walked over to the door of the cabin, where basins of water had been set on a log ready for their washing. Karl was one of the first to reach the place. He caught a glimpse of Olga, her back to the door, putting steaming pans of fowl, floating in gravy, on the table. He smiled secretly as he dipped his head and face in the basin. The men came up from the barn in little groups, and washed themselves vigorously, splashing the water over the log and against the side of the house. They sputtered and blew as they dashed the water in their faces and rubbed it over their heads and necks with their big brown hands. When they filed through the door, their faces were red and shiny, and their hair was plastered to their heads. Their eyes roved hungrily over the dishes of heaped-up food waiting for them, and took heed of little else.

Nils said a short grace as soon as they were all seated. While their heads were bent, Karl glanced up slyly at Olga, who was standing across from him near the stove. He saw her eyes were fastened upon him. She seemed to be unaware of anything except that he was near her again. Her look did not change when his eyes met hers, except that its absorbed consciousness of his presence seemed to deepen. It was he who finally turned away, flattered, but a little uneasy at the passionate intensity of her expression. Supposing she were crazy, as he had thought once, she might want to kill him if she knew about the German girl in Blackbird — or about the other girls! But he was n't quite ready to let her forget him. A girl like that ought to be taught how to love. His mind was filled with hot thoughts and feverish possibilities as he took up his knife and bent over his plate.

The men ate in silence except for an occasional low-spoken request for some article of food outside their reach. Jensen's face was very red and his hand shook a little as he reached for bread, but he ate steadily, drank four cups of coffee, and was as silent as the rest. Karl sat next to him, and as Olga was filling his coffee cup for the fourth time she felt her hand seized behind Jensen's back by Karl, and held in a tight grip for a moment that seemed to her unending. She leaned against the wall along which she had squeezed her way to reach Jensen, trembling with joy and misery. The two emotions were so entangled that she did not know which was the stronger. The pot of coffee, hanging from her right hand, was hot against her side, and all the room except the half-averted head of Karl became a blur to her.

Just then her mother called to her to fill Gustaf's cup. Her hand was suddenly released, and she moved away. When the men got up to straggle from the room, some of them shamefacedly thanked Brigitta for the good dinner, as they passed out through the door. When Karl left the table, he walked over to Olga, carrying his coffee cup in his hand, and asked her in his ordinary voice to half-fill it once more. As he stood with his back to the rest, while she poured the coffee, he whispered softly, "Olga, I am going north to-morrow with the machine. You don't want to let me go without another kiss. Meet me by the bridge to-night, after the threshing is over."

She set the coffee pot back on the stove and stared at him, wide-eyed with terror, not of him but of the overwhelming impulse within herself that was driving her into his arms.

"Olga," he said softly, "beautiful Olga, will you come?"

Everything but her love for him seemed to fall away from her. Her world suddenly flowered in beauty, with Karl and herself alone in the centre of its radiance.

"Yes," she answered, so low he could heardly hear her words, "I will come." As she spoke, there was the same strange light in her eyes that had so startled him when he had caught her fixed look earlier in the day.

When he went out of the door, that look still upon him, he was conscious of a momentary return of his uneasy feeling, but the impression gradually faded, and his sensuous nature soon lost itself in daydreams of the emotions and experience that awaited him in the protecting darkness of the coming night.

## CHAPTER XIII

The afternoon wore on, the heat constantly growing more oppressive. The can by the barn had more than once to be refilled. Jensen's trips to the wagon became more frequent, and he began to show the effects more plainly. Once Matts saw him strike Oscar brutally on the side of the head.

The straw stack was too high and too loosely laid to make Karl's efforts to mount it very easy. He had been, for some time, depending on keeping the carrier clear by raising it higher and trusting that the straw at the top would not catch and clog the moving slats. He had managed to slip into the house once or twice, on various errands — once to take the can of drink in to be refilled, and once to look at the cheap little clock that stood on a shelf by the stove, saying he wished to be sure of the hour. The first time, Brigitta had been in the room and he had had no chance to speak to Olga, but his look was more full of meaning to her than any words which he could command. The second time he went in, Brigitta had stepped out to carry potato peelings to the pigpen. Karl spoke no words this time, either. Instead, he threw his arms round Olga, whose eyes, tender with love, gave him no denial, and kissed her with a long, clinging kiss that made her faint and sick with feeling.

She had no consciousness of the passing of time as he held her close, but he was not so lost to what was going on about them. When he heard a step outside the door, he threw her from him so suddenly that she, whose whole body had seemed to sink on his breast, tottered a moment while she was forcing her confused mind to clear and to

take control once more. As Brigitta came in, her face showed surprise at seeing them together, but Karl managed to say, in an offhand way, "I wanted to see the time, but the sun is about as good as a clock; I 'll look at it again." He walked out without looking again at Olga, who had by this time recovered enough to busy herself with the bread she was baking.

"You watch out for that Karl Burghardt," said Brigitta, uneasily. "He likes to get all the girls in love with him."

To her own astonishment, Olga was able to laugh and to say carelessly, "I shall be looking for a big Swede like Matts when my time comes. I 'm not afraid of Karl."

Her mother said no more, and Olga's thoughts sank back into a consciousness apart, in which she felt over again the touch of Karl's lips and the pressure of his encircling arms.

When Karl got back to the stack, he found that the straw was crowding dangerously at the upper end of the carrier. He shouted to Jensen to stop the oxen a moment, so that he might climb up and clear away the tangle before there was a complete blocking of the slats. He had seized his pitchfork and stood waiting, ready to climb as soon as the machine slackened, when he was startled by a sickening scream from Oscar. He ran toward the power machine from which the cry came, the others pale with fright close behind him. No one seemed to know exactly what had happened, but there at the centre of the anchored machine lay Jensen. His body sprawled across the ground, half hidden by the circle of halting oxen, and his head was caught and crushed between the cogs of the power wheel and the rundles of the lantern pinion at the end of the tumbling rod. The picture was stamped on his mind in images of horror — the prostrate figure, limp in the fall of drunkenness, the screaming boy, the cattle still strain-

ing at their yokes though the wheel no longer turned, the men running from all directions; and above all the burning sun, its rays sifting through the cloud of dust that hovered over the threshing, and veiling the panic and terror in a saffron mist.

The men quickly unfastened the oxen, reversed the wheel, and with shaking hands pushed back against the great sweeps. They disentangled the body and lifted Jensen out, his head mangled and torn, and laid him on the dusty ground. Their first thought was of a doctor, but the nearest one was twenty-five miles away, and it was clear that no doctor could help Jensen now. There was nothing to be done but to carry the body into the barn, where it was laid gently on some hay. A sheet was brought from the house and laid in straight folds of white over the shapeless distortion.

Matts, after one glance of horror, had devoted himself to soothing the frantic Oscar, who was trying, hysterically, to tell him how it happened, and how he had stopped the oxen, but too late. Matts's mind, aghast, was filled with the thought of the helpless woman in the cabin, suddenly left with five young children and a mortgaged farm, to struggle alone in this pioneer country against overpowering odds.

Someone must carry the terrible news to Mrs. Jensen. It was hurriedly decided not to move the body for a while. A coffin would have to be made, and the women must do what they could to hide the tragic mutilation wrought by the iron cogs, and to soften, as far as possible, the horror of the first sight for the stricken wife and children.

No one offered to be the messenger to the widow of the dead man. Brigitta, usually calm, was so unstrung by the sudden happening that she shrank helplessly from the thought of such an ordeal. In the midst of the discussion, carried on in hushed tones, Oscar said timidly, "I can tell

my mother, if Matts will come with me." As he spoke, he looked up in Matts's face in humble appeal. Matts's expression of doubt and uncertainty cleared a little as he saw the boy's eyes lifted to him, but he did not answer at once.

"Will you go?" asked Johan, who seemed to have taken control of the situation by virtue of the quiet power and strength of his character. The rest of the men seemed too shocked to think, and they instinctively leaned on the natural leader in their midst. Karl was boss of the crew and nephew of the owner of the thresher and might have been expected to take the responsibility, but he was completely unnerved, and stood on the outer edge of the group, trembling and nauseated. Olga, swept out of herself by the shock of the accident, went up to him, indifferent in her agitation to either observation or criticism, and tried to help him regain his self-control. She spoke to him with the tender firmness of a mother reassuring a frightened child. He turned upon her and rebuffed her so savagely that she fled from him, cut to the heart. For the first moments of her anguish, she did not know how to disentangle her personal grief from her torturing sympathy for the tragedy that had just befallen. The whole world seemed one long horror of suffering in which she wandered alone. She went from house to barn and back again, the tears running unnoticed down her cheeks, unable to think what to do or where to turn in this fresh breakdown of her hopes. No one heeded her, and the accident would have seemed sufficient cause for any emotional excitement, had she been observed.

Matts's reply to Johan's question expressed his willingness to go with Oscar as the bearer of the news. Karl, still trembling, had started to harness the horses. As he fumbled at the straps, he said that he would drive them to the Jensen farm and then go on to report to his uncle what

had happened. When the horses were ready, the three climbed into the wagon, Matts with a quick handclasp for his pale and weeping mother, but Karl with not so much as a word or a backward look for anyone. He seemed only eager to put the day and its terrible climax out of his mind forever. Olga stood in the yard, her eyes following the wagon as long as it was in sight. She felt stunned at the suddenness with which her life, as well as that of the Jensen family, had been overwhelmed. Could the man in the rapidly disappearing wagon, his back so determinedly turned to her, be the same one who had held her in his hot embrace only a few short hours ago? He had broken down in her, forever, the defenses of a lifetime. Did he care so little for her agony of consent that he could leave her without a word or a look?

Meanwhile Karl, released from the immediate presence of the tragedy, was all speculation and eager question. He made Oscar tell over and over again what he had seen, and he repeated several times what he himself had thought and felt when he first heard the boy's cry. He was full of tales of fatal accidents he had witnessed or heard described. As the miles passed, he became more and more buoyant and increasingly full of zest at the thought of being the bearer of news which would be the winter's topic round the stove in Burghardt's store.

Matts sat silent, revolving in his mind the words he would use to break the news to Mrs. Jensen. He tried to believe that he was bringing to her the grief normal to a woman who loves her husband, but memories of her face the night he brought the drunken Jensen into the cabin rose before him and shut out the thought. No — all he could do would be to help her preserve the decencies of grief for the sake of the children, who were, after all, Jensen's children as well as hers. The neighbors' feelings would also have to be considered. Since she was destined

to live in their midst, the members of the little community must not think of her as different from any other wife deprived of a husband's love and care.

The little clearing, quiet in the afternoon light, came in sight all too soon. Karl did not drive in, but stopped his horse on the main road and let the two jump out.

"Good luck to you," he called to them cheerily, and whipping up his horses, in his impatience to be first to bring word to the tiny town, drove off in a swirl of dust.

## CHAPTER XIV

When Matts opened the cabin door, Mrs. Jensen was just starting a fire in the kitchen stove, and a little puff of gray smoke eddied about her as she set the lid quickly in place and turned to see who was coming. Christina was sitting in a chair, holding the baby, who was alternately pulling her hair and laughing joyously at her feints of indignant protest. Save for them, the room was empty.

One look at the faces of Matts and Oscar told Mrs. Jensen that something terrible had happened. She stood without making a sound, waiting for what they had to tell, like a brave soldier facing the enemy's fire.

"We have bad news for you, Mrs. Jensen," said Matts, quietly. "There was an accident at the threshing and Jensen — " he flinched a moment as he saw Christina put down the baby and start up from her chair, but he looked back to the erect figure of Mrs. Jensen by the stove and finished his message. "Your husband was so badly injured that he died."

Mrs. Jensen's eyes never wavered from his face. She laid a trembling hand for a moment on the edge of the stove as if to steady herself, and bent toward him.

"He had been drinking," she said in a harsh voice, unlike her own. "I told him he was not fit to go, and for answer he struck me in the face. That is the husband I have lost."

She stood erect again. Her eyes did not leave his, and he watched, as if he could not tear himself from the sight, the flow of expression which crossed her face in waves. Christina had gone up to her and put her young arms

around her mother, but Mrs. Jensen took no notice. She seemed to have no eyes for anyone except Matts.

"And it is you — *you,* who bring me this news! I have not a single tear, not one." Her look seemed to implore his understanding and forgiveness. "I cannot pretend to you, can I? You would not want me to deceive you, would you? Oh, you must not think I am a hard woman because I do not cry when my tormentor is taken away!"

She shuddered violently, and, clasping Christina in a quick embrace, hid her face in the girl's soft hair. Oscar had drawn near her, but, less controlled than she, was sobbing afresh at the horrifying memory of his first experience with death.

"Mother," he said, brokenly, "I am going to be the man of the family. Matts says I must take care of you now."

Mrs. Jensen put one arm around the boy, and the three stood together a moment, comforting each other.

Mrs. Jensen was the first to regain self-control. "We will all take care of each other," she said, once more speaking in her natural voice. She pressed the two children close to her. "And Matts will always be our friend." She looked up at him, humbly, her final words a hesitating question.

Matts impulsively crossed to her and took her slender roughened hand in his.

"Of course I will always be your friend. You see, I loved all of you the first time I saw you, and I can't stop now. I don't always think quickly enough what a friend should do, but you must ask me. I know it 's going to be hard," he said, certain in his anxious heart that Mrs. Jensen did not yet realize how hard, "but perhaps I can make it a little easier."

As she spoke, Mrs. Jensen's look deepened as though her years of sorrow had brought her only tenderness for all the world. She clung to his hand, saying softly, "You told

me once that nothing really hurts us inside if we can still believe there is beauty and good in the world. I have never forgotten that. I have said it over to myself every day. And it is because I know how good and beautiful you are that I know it is true. So you see, even when you did not think you were doing anything, you were helping me when I needed it most."

Matts was conscious again of the strange embarrassment he had suffered when, once before, this woman had admitted him to the secret places of her heart. He reproached himself for the feeling, but he could not shake it off. He seemed to himself to be treading an unknown path, where the slightest misstep might bring disaster. He pressed her hand once more and dropped it gently.

"You say such kind things, you make me want to do everything for you myself, but all the neighbors wish to help, too, so you must tell me what to say to them." His manner was most matter-of-fact, and he went on directly: "What do you want done with the oxen?"

As she answered, he asked question after question, checking the rise of emotion in them both by the urgent need for making prompt decisions. It seemed best to Mrs. Jensen, after a little thought, to let the oxen stay with the thresher. She would be paid for their use, in groceries at Burghardt's store. Oscar could take care of the cow and calf and the chickens, and he and the other children could finish the husking of the corn which Jensen had begun. The hand threshing and winnowing of the wheat could wait until Matts or some neighbor was free to help.

Matts asked if there were relatives to whom letters should be written. Mrs. Jensen flushed.

"I am an orphan and I never had either a brother or a sister. Olaf's family are in Sweden. They never had anything to do with him after he married." She hesitated. "They did not want him to marry me," she went on,

forcing herself to speak. She waited a moment, as if she expected a question, but Matts's attentive look did not change, and he only said, "It seems lonely in a new country at times like this, even if one has relatives." Her look of gratitude at his respect for her reserve was like a wave of color on her face.

"Not when we have friends like you. Is it, Christina?" she asked, taking the girl's hand and resting it against her cheek. Christina looked up at Matts, whose tall figure towered above her. The smile of her trusting affection for him shone in her eyes. Matts, looking at her in turn, thought he had never seen a lovelier face. Christina had her mother's quick responsiveness and subtle changes of expression, and her beauty had, besides, the delicate freshness of the young girl, not yet conscious that her years of flowering are upon her. He smiled tenderly back at her, but neither of them spoke. The shadow that hung over them made the words of affection slow in coming to speech.

Mrs. Jensen's decisions were rapidly made. The funeral should be in the church, and the burial in the adjoining cemetery. When she had last looked at that fenced-off square, pathetic symbol of a settled community, with its three bare, unlovely mounds, the two smaller ones marking the last resting place of babies who had not lived long enough to rest anywhere else, she had little thought for whom the fourth grave would be dug.

She told Matts that she did not wish to look again on Jensen's face, nor did she want her children's last memory of their father to be his broken body which was so soon to be put in the ground. Matts understood and sympathized with her feeling, but he was full of doubt as to what might be thought of her by her neighbors, to whom looking upon their dead ranked almost as a religious ritual. However, it was for her to decide, and he made no protest.

Before long Oscar came in with the other boys he had

gone to find. Their faces were flushed with hurried walking and the two younger ones carried pails half filled with clusters of hazelnuts, sheathed in brown, shriveled husks, which they had been pulling off the low bushes in the woods. They were awe-struck and silent, watching their mother's face as if looking to her to tell them what to feel as well as what to do. In her loving words and her gentle quieting of their fears Matts saw again the emergence of that quick tenderness, so ardent and expressive, that had startled him more than once before. The warmth of his own feelings, which found no outlet in the poverty of emotion in which he lived, went out to her in a rush. He caught suddenly a glimpse of how rich a source of happiness the affections might be to those who neither feared them nor rigidly tamed them to the dull routine of the days. Her life with Jensen must have been a waste like that of mighty waters impounded behind a dam, with only tiny outlets here and there for the water to trickle down into the thirsty valley below. Would her nature expand now, and be at last free both to give and to receive joy?

While she talked with the younger children, Matts and Oscar went out to see that the cow was brought in from the pasture for the milking, and that everything in the barn was ready for the night. He arranged a place in the hay where he could sleep with the boys. He had promised the pale and tremulous Oscar that, when he had carried the word of his mother's wishes to the waiting men at the farm, he would come back and stay as long as they needed him.

When he returned to the house, Burghardt had driven up, bringing his wife to spend the night with Mrs. Jensen. He offered to drive Matts to the Swenson farm and to carry back the body. He was full of questions and excitement, and kept urging Mrs. Jensen, who listened to him

with quiet dignity but without reply, to submit to the will of God. Finally he and Matts drove off at a fast trot, and soon disappeared down the dusty road.

As the owner of the threshing machine, Burghardt felt himself to be one of the major parties to the tragedy. He could not conceal his regret that he had not been an eye-witness of the accident, but he seemed to take comfort in the thought that a member of his family had been present.

"I left Karl to keep store for me," he said, adding, a little contemptuously, "Karl is a white-livered fellow and gets sick at the sight of blood. I knew they would not want him around."

While they were still some distance from the farm, they could hear the sharp strokes of a hammer. They knew at once that the coffin must be nearing completion. Burghardt listened, with head tilted to catch the sound, and remarked, as one whose mind forecasts quickly. "The funeral will bring a lot of people to my store. Old Westgren's was the first burial in the cemetery, and I sold a lot of goods that day."

Matts did not answer, and Burghardt's mind seemed to linger on the happy prospect until they drove up to the barn. The thresher stood silent, the late afternoon sun throwing long shadows on the ground at its side. An opened bundle of grain still lay on the chute, halfway down its incline, and a partly filled bag of wheat was propped under the open vent of the machine. The oxen had been unfastened from the sweeps and were tied against the barn. The ground around the cogwheel was trampled and muddy. Pail after pail of water had been poured over it to wash away the traces of the tragedy. The broad path worn by the hooves of the oxen was no longer a clear circle, but was crossed in all directions by prints of the feet of men.

The threshers were waiting in front of the cabin, and they gathered round the wagon as it came to a stop, to hear what Mrs. Jensen wished them to do. There was much head-shaking among the older men when all the details were told, but no one openly objected. The younger men took up the completed coffin and carried it into the barn. The others followed with hammer and nails and the boards for the top, all ready to do as the widow had asked. The body had been made ready as well as was possible with the simple appliances at hand, and had been wrapped in the covering sheet. The men gently lifted the shrouded form, invested now with a dignity it had never worn in life, and laid it in the rough pine box. Gustaf Lindblom made a short prayer, while the rest stood about him in the barn with bowed heads and awed faces.

The long yellow box was borne out of the barn and slid carefully into the back of the wagon. After a few parting words to the others, Burghardt and Matts started on the slow ride back to the Jensen cabin, carrying their quiet burden for its last trip past the woods and stubbled fields. They had gone less than a mile down the road when there came to their ears, borne on the light wind that stirs as the sun gets low, the whirr and throbbing of the thresher. The machine was again at its pressing task of preparing food for the living, which even death itself cannot be allowed to interrupt.

## CHAPTER XV

After the funeral, the minister and the leading men of the community gathered at the Jensen cabin to consult with Mrs. Jensen about her plans for the future of the little family thus thrown upon its own resources. Mrs. Jensen told the men that she had no living kin, and she would not consent to any appeal for help being sent to Jensen's relatives in Sweden. Her attitude was strange to her Swedish neighbors with their strong sense of family obligation, but she offered no explanation. Instead, her determination to starve rather than do what seemed the natural thing to the others was so evident that the subject was dropped.

She refused with equal firmness the suggestion that the children be divided among the neighbors and brought up by them.

"No, no," she cried, with the first show of deep emotion they had seen in her. "I will not give up my children! You cannot have them." She looked round the little circle like a wild creature at bay. To her excited thought, for the moment they were enemies, plotting to rob her of all she held dear; but, seeing the distress on their serious, kindly faces, she checked herself, and went on more quietly: "You mean only kindness, I am sure, but you don't know how I love my children. Oh, we can manage by ourselves. I was nurse for a doctor in Sweden for three years and he taught me all he knew about nursing. I have been thinking that, if we could stay here, the boys could look after the farm and Christina would cook for them and take care of the baby. I could go out to nurse

sick people and take care of mothers when their babies are born. That would help to pay the interest on the mortgage. With the cow, and what grain and food the boys and I could raise, we could live." She ended with almost an appeal for belief from the men in front of her.

There was little change in their expressions as she spoke, but Adolph Johnson, with the thought of the new baby coming to his family and the old grandmother needing constant care, remarked, "Well, Mrs. Jensen, you might try it for a year"; and added with a grim smile, "We 'll all be as sick as we can." The circle relaxed a little at that, but they shook their heads doubtfully when they got outside the cabin and could discuss her plans more frankly.

"She 's an obstinate woman," said Lindblom, disapprovingly, "but that Oscar 's a smart boy. In a few years he can run the farm. When she 's a little older, Christina can go out to service in Blackbird or St. Paul and help with the mortgage." His voice hardened a little as he ended: "But I suppose when that time comes, Mrs. Jensen 'll say she can't let her go."

"She 's too close-mouthed for me," observed Johnson. "That 's the first word she ever said about being a nurse. Where 's she come from, anyway? She never answers anybody's questions, my old woman says. Has she got a secret, or does she think she 's better than we are?"

The minister interrupted. "We are all sisters and brothers in the Lord, Brother Johnson. Let us keep in mind that this woman is afflicted, and give her our abundance without question."

The men talked together by the barn, their backs against the rough wall. The work that must be done would have to be divided among the various families. It was decided that August Lindblom and the oldest Johnson boy would chop and saw enough wood on the edge of the clearing

for the winter. Oscar could easily haul it to the house with the ox Mrs. Jensen was to keep. The other ox Burghardt had offered to take, and in payment he would give credit at the store for the supplies that must be bought. Matts, with the help of the children, would thresh and winnow the grain, and finish the husking of the corn. The blacksmith, Larsen, was willing to take the Jensen grain and corn with his own to the mill at Red Falls, where he would have it ground into meal for the winter's food. Mrs. Burghardt had promised some yarn she had made of the wool from her own sheep as a gift to Mrs. Jensen, and Oscar and Jens, who had learned to use knitting needles when they were small, could knit it into warm stockings for the family. Trousers for the boys might be cut from those which Jensen had worn, and the women of the little community would see that Mrs. Jensen and Christina had such clothes as they needed.

After settling the details, they all went back into the cabin, and the minister, as spokesman, told Mrs. Jensen their kindly plans for her help. She thanked them with such a radiance and warmth of feeling that they were inclined to forget their earlier disapproval.

"She 's a plucky little woman," they said to one another as they went their separate ways, "and we 'll see that she gets along till the boys are a few years older."

After they had gone, Mrs. Jensen still sat where they had left her, pondering on the future. Her face was anxious and her mind full of uncertainties, but in her heart was a lightness which she had not felt since the days of her childhood. There were moments when she seemed, in her thoughts, to have waked from a horrible nightmare. She had to check herself, as if from an indecency of happiness, when she saw by the sympathy of her neighbors how bereft they felt she was. But she could not think tragically of the future. The years of struggle ahead, whose diffi-

culties she knew only too well from the years of struggle behind, looked to her like years of joy. She would move no more. Here, in this new country, she and her children could build up a home in which there would be no more harsh words and no more shrinking from the horror of blows. Never again need she fear to pour out on her children the love she felt stirring like a living thing in her heart. Summers and winters alike would be times of happiness and freedom from dread. The beautiful world would speak to her with a new voice, the voice of her own revived life.

In the fresh energy of her expanding emotions, she rose and went to the door. Outside the sun was shining on a warm and tranquil earth, and the unexpected note of a bird in the near-by woods came, clear and sweet, to her ears. She was startled at the leap her heart gave, as though surprising a messenger of joy. Christina, who was at some household task, saw her suddenly throw out her arms, the lovely ghost of a smile on her lips, and wait breathless until the song ceased. Even after the sound had died away, she still stood listening, like one whose ear is tuned to notes inaudible to others.

At moments like this, Christina felt almost as if the mother, so sad and crushed, to whom she had clung through the years of her own warped childhood, had become a radiant stranger living in a world apart. Her thought seemed continually to fly from the routine of the day like a bird from its nest. Only her tenderness for her children remained unchanged, and the sound of young voices, freed from the restraint of fear, accompanied her wherever she went.

None of the family had seen Matts since the funeral. He had spent the first night after Jensen's death in the barn with the boys, while the women watched in the house with Mrs. Jensen, but the next day he had gone. Oscar

had talked with him a few minutes at the cemetery, and had learned that he was starting north with the threshing crew that night. Since then, though the children had waited and longed for his coming, he had not appeared.

One still morning, three weeks after the funeral, they saw two oxen turn into the clearing, guided by a tall man who was walking beside the animals and waving his arm to the children. They knew in a moment that it was Matts, bringing the Swenson steers to thresh for them. Their own oxen were still working for Burghardt. With joyous shouts they rushed to welcome their beloved friend. At the sound of the children's cries, Mrs. Jensen and Christina, who were inside the cabin, ran to the door. Mrs. Jensen stopped at the threshold, shading her smiling eyes from the bright sun as she watched the advancing procession. The color on her cheeks deepened as she caught sight of the fair-haired ox-driver, but she did not go forward to meet him. Instead, she stood quietly, framed in the open door, while Christina ran out to join the eager children. Each boy was struggling to be first to help Matts unfasten the animals. Christina was looking on, laughing at their efforts, when Matts picked her up and set her triumphantly on the back of one of the oxen.

"There," he said, laughingly pointing her out to the boys, "she looks like a picture I saw once in the farm paper, called 'Europa and the Bull.' She's a good deal handsomer than the girl in the picture, but the painter's bull was certainly better-looking than old Thor."

Mrs. Jensen laughed with the rest. She wondered at the brightness that seemed to have come into the dull little yard with the coming of Matts.

"We have looked for you every day," she said happily. "Now that you are here, everything will go well."

"I have come to start the threshing," Matts began,

lifting Christina off the ox and giving her a reassuring pat on the shoulder as he set her on the ground. "Now that I have found such a good rider for old Thor, we ought to do it quickly."

Mrs. Jensen watched him with a smile. She hardly heeded what he said, so warmed was she with the sense of his presence and of the life and gayety he brought with him. He looked at her intently in turn, amazed at the change the three weeks had brought. Far from being crushed and aged by the heavy responsibilities that had fallen upon her, she had about her a look of youth and a sweet freshness that made her resemblance to Christina more marked than ever. She must be thirty-five at least, and yet her manner had the delicate radiance of a girl. What had happened? Of course she could not be expected to grieve for Jensen. His going must have been a blessed release to the victims of his brutality, but her look spoke of more than the mere end of suffering. Perhaps she felt free for the first time to live in a world outside the happenings of every day, as he had learned so long ago to do. Sometime, if she were willing, he would tell her about the interests that filled his waking hours, and the joys of his inner life. She might, in turn, reveal to him those mysteries of her nature he had felt but dared not probe from the first days of their acquaintance.

Meanwhile there was work to be done. The baby was sitting in the dooryard, playing with a basket of corn cobs, but Matts led the other children back of the barn to a level space which had been baked hard and dry by the hot summer sun. In the centre of the plot he and Oscar drove a stake, and in a circle round it the boys piled bundles of wheat to a depth of eighteen inches. The two oxen were tied on opposite sides of the central post, and Oscar kept them moving in the circle, trampling on the heaped-up

sheaves. Round and round they went, their hooves lost in the masses of yellow stalks. There was enough spring in the heaped straw to keep the animals' weight from crushing the precious kernels, but the bruising of the wheat heads by the oxen's tread loosened the hold of the encasing glumes. The grains, freed from their wrappings, slid out, and, gradually sifting through the agitated straw, reached the ground.

Oscar and Matts pitchforked the straw to the side and swept up the grain, mixed as it was with dust and chaff and the stirred-up surface of the earth. They stored the wheat in the barn until a day should come windy enough for the winnowing. The process was repeated again and again, with layer after layer of sheaves, until the tall stack had shrunk almost to the ground.

The boys worked without resting. Mrs. Jensen and Christina ran out often from the house to enjoy the fun that always accompanied Matts when he had children for companions. Even the oxen seemed to need little urging as they rounded the post steadily, hour after hour. Occasionally they snatched at the straw under their feet, and chewed it leisurely as they moved. Their work seemed strangely easy with neither a heavy yoke on their shoulders nor an endless drag behind.

When dusk came, the animals were unfastened and led away to be fed and watered and tied in the barn for the night. Oscar brought in the cow and Matts watched him milk her. The night of Jensen's death, Matts had taught Oscar how to milk. Jensen had always insisted that his wife keep to the Swedish custom of having the women do the milking, but Matts had long felt that the burdens of a pioneering woman were enough without that. He and his father had for years milked the cows at home, and, when his chance came, he decided that Mrs. Jensen should be freed from that labor. Oscar was always eager to do

whatever Matts wished, and had proved himself a skillful milker from the beginning. As Matts stood watching, he praised his progress and showed him how to strip the bag and leave the cow as dry as possible. Together they carried the pail of milk with its top of foamy bubbles into the house, to be strained through a clean cloth and set in pans in the cellar to cool.

Christina and Mrs. Jensen were putting bowls of hot corn mush on the table, and they asked Matts to pour a big pitcher full of the fresh milk to use with it. They all sat round the table — even the baby in Mrs. Jensen's lap was included. The meal was not silent as meals in that house had always been. Instead, the cabin was full of Matts's merry talk and the children's delighted laughter. Matts himself, accustomed to scant attention at home, grew light-hearted at the joy with which his every word was greeted. Mrs. Jensen said little, but he felt her smiling look upon him when she was not engaged in feeding the baby his mush and milk or seeing that the others were served.

When the dishes were washed and put away, Matts took up a stocking Jens had been working on and knitted vigorously while he talked. Oscar got out his knitting, too, but Mrs. Jensen sat in her chair with her usually busy fingers idle. She was enjoying the tumult of happiness about her and, at the same time, watching Matts's face as he shifted his needles and unrolled his tight ball of yarn. He looked up once and caught her absorbed gaze fixed upon him. He thought again how young and pretty she was with that lovely light in her eyes. The unconscious appeal in her expression prompted something within him to reply. He laid his knitting down and said, including all of them in his audience, though he spoke directly to Mrs. Jensen, "I have a wonderful story to tell you. It will make you glad you live in New Sweden. It 's about a

magic wheat that is going to grow in our fields just like any other wheat."

He picked up his stocking again and knitted rapidly as he told them of his discovery of the big ear of wheat in his father's field the year before, and of the success of his first planting. His voice grew more eager as he told them of the seed from the mountains of northern Sweden for which he had sent, and of his dream of crossing the two and making a better wheat than Minnesota had ever seen. Much of what he said could not be understood by the children, but Mrs. Jensen listened, breathless. "I know," she said when he had finished, "I know! It is like you, trying to make things better for others!"

Matts laughed. "I am afraid it is nothing so nice as that." He blushed a little, boyishly, at having to confess himself. "You see, I like to watch things as they are, and when the wonderful idea came to me of making them different, just myself, one of the living things changing the others, I was so excited I could hardly do my work. But I 'd just as soon plough now, for my mind is full of other things." He looked at Mrs. Jensen with a little nod and a smile. "This is a hard country, but it is n't hard for me any more. Every day I think of a new thing to try with my wheat, and at night I dream that it turned out the way I hoped."

She tried to answer him, but the impossibility of putting her emotion into words stopped her. She managed to stammer, "It will turn out as you hope. We will help you," and turned to the children as if to mask her feeling by an appeal to them. "You must help Matts make the perfect wheat," she said, and then, for some reason as mysterious to herself as to the others, her lips began to tremble and the tears came to her eyes. She rose abruptly.

"We are all tired. We must go to bed," she said, a little unsteadily.

In a moment she had regained her self-control and was able to smile and say good night as the two older boys and Matts went out to their beds in the barn. But after the rest were asleep she lay long awake, tossing and turning, her mind torn with uncertainty. She kept whispering to herself, burying the sound in her pillow, "I could love him more than anyone. But he is too good and too great for me. He does not need love. He needs someone who is wise enough to understand him. I can only love him"; and over and over again, as if it had become the refrain of her life, "I can only love him," with passionate insistence, "but more than anyone else!"

## CHAPTER XVI

The wheat was threshed and winnowed, and had gone to the mill to be ground before Matts returned to his home. The corn was not all husked and only a little of it shelled, but it was easy work for the younger boys, and they could finish it without him. Meanwhile his father needed his help and he had to leave. When he went, he said to Mrs. Jensen, who came to the door to say good-bye, "Do you know, I shall worry about you unless you promise to send Oscar for me if you need a man. He is pretty nearly as good as a man now, but he can't quite equal that." He rolled up his sleeve and gripped the contracted muscles of his upper arm as if to show how much valuable strength he had to offer. Mrs. Jensen smiled with the quick flush of expression that seemed natural to her, and then said, "You think you bring us only a hard worker, Matts, but what you really bring us is happiness." At her last word her voice trembled a little. She turned abruptly and went into the house, leaving him standing there puzzled and a little baffled.

The two weeks he had spent in the small cabin had been the happiest of his life. He had been in constant companionship with children whom he loved, and he had, for the first time in his life, talked freely with a human being who could put thoughts into words. He had never known anyone, except perhaps the minister, who could do that. To Matts, groping in the world of thought, it was an unending joy to give ideas body by expressing them, and to receive fresh ideas in return, springing fully formed from the mind of another.

This new Mrs. Jensen, so changed from the unhappy

woman he had first known, filled him with wonder. To watch her with her children was a constant delight. She was not a good housekeeper, — he noticed many ways in which she failed to live up even to his own mother's very simple standards, — but her nature was richly inventive and seemed to find, each day, new ways of expressing itself to those she loved. He and the children forgot irregular meals and an untidy house in the atmosphere of praise and appreciation in which they lived. But he saw that she had her moments of sorrow and anxiety, though she did her best to hide them. He had caught glimpses of her when her face was clouded and her eyes fixed upon him with the sombre look he remembered as her habitual expression before Jensen's death. But when he turned to her, her whole aspect would change, and he was left to wonder if he had only imagined shadows where there were none.

As he walked from the house to the cart and the waiting oxen, the boys crowded round to see the last of him.

"I wish you could always live with us," said Jens, clinging to Matts's hand as if unwilling to let him go.

"Yes, yes," cried five-year-old Rolf. "I 'll give you my pillow if you 'll stay!"

Matts smiled at the offer. He knew what affection it meant, for Rolf's little pillow, stuffed with hay, was his dearest treasure.

Christina looked at Matts with a little wistful smile, as he stood poised on the hub of the cart, about to jump in.

"Oh, could you stay?" she asked, softly.

Matts felt a sharp pang at his own yearning impulse. Had he grown to love this family so dearly that it was closer to him than his own? Or was it only their love for him that was reaching out to draw him back and keep him for their own? In his confusion of mind he could not think clearly.

"I will come again," he said, jumping into the cart. "I will come so often you will get tired of me."

He had trained the oxen to take direction from a driver in the cart as well as from one at the side, and they started forward at his word. They moved slowly out to the road, the children walking by the wheels to be with their friend as long as possible. Matts looked back and saw Mrs. Jensen standing at the door, watching him go. He waved to her, and she waved back. As long as he could see the cabin, she did not move. The memory of that slender figure stayed with him. She had a brave spirit to face the years. Was he the one to help her through them? To her he must seem only a boy. He remembered furious words of Jensen's, pushed away in disgust at the time they were uttered, and wondered if she too remembered them. But whatever the future held, he could love and care for the children as any big brother might. Nothing could happen to make that impossible.

When Matts reached home he found everything much as usual, but he was shocked at the change that had taken place in Olga in the weeks since the accident. He had hardly seen her during that time, for he had been either in the north with the machine or staying at the Jensens', and had been at home only an hour or so two weeks before. When Olga stepped out of the cabin for a moment, he turned to his mother and asked anxiously, "What has happened to Olga? She looks like the Nyberg girl that died of the wasting sickness."

His mother looked up in surprise at his question and considered a moment.

"She is a little thin," she said, "but girls always get thin in the summer when the work is heavy. She will get fat enough now that the winter is coming."

Matts said no more, but he felt sure it was not hard work that had put the dark circles under Olga's eyes and

made her step so languid. He was glad to notice that after that day his mother watched out for the girl a little. She made her rest now and then, and tried to cook the food that Olga especially liked. But she seemed to get no better, and Matts made up his mind that he would talk to her and try to persuade her to go with him to Red Falls to see a doctor, when he took the grain to be ground.

He found his chance one evening when, from the barn door, he saw her walking up the road to the north. Once or twice before she had gone up that road, and come back exhausted after an absence of an hour or two. Matts followed her quietly at some little distance, slowly overtaking her. She did not look back, but seemed hurrying, as if for an engagement that would not keep.

He noticed, as something new, that she was no longer careful how she arranged her hair, and seemed indifferent as to what she wore. Her scarf had not been taken from the shelf for weeks. He wondered, with a little thrill of terror, if she knew that she was sick and must die, and so had lost interest in the things of this world.

He caught up with her shortly before she reached the bridge over the little stream in the deep woods. She turned at the sound of his footsteps, and swayed as if about to fall when she saw who it was.

"Oh! I thought — I thought — " she started to say, and broke off, trembling. Matts put his arm round her to steady her.

"Olga, what is it?" he said, looking anxiously in her face. "Are you sick? Have you walked too far?"

"No, no," she said faintly, trying to avoid his eye. Then, suddenly, as if unable to resist his tenderness and sympathy, she threw her arms round his neck and wept, her face buried in the folds of his shirt. He did not speak, but patted her shoulder affectionately, as if she had been

a child who must have her cry out. But her appearance, when she had quieted, was not that of a child. The clearing of expression, like the summer sky after a rain, which marks the end of youthful tempests, was not there. Instead, her face bore the overcast look, telling of a worse storm to come, which in cyclone weather so often lies behind a first scattering shower.

"Olga," said Matts, decidedly, "I am going to take you with me to Red Falls to see the doctor. You 've worked too hard this summer, and now you 're sick."

Olga's lip trembled a moment, but she shook her head.

"No, I 'm not sick. I don't want to see a doctor, but I would like to go with you to Red Falls. Perhaps I could find a place to work there."

She had regained control of her misery, and she faced Matts resolutely.

"I want to go away. Lots of the girls go to work when they get my age. I am tired of the farm."

Matts looked at her in amazement. The gentle Olga, who had always planned to stay at home and help her mother, had at last sickened at the dullness of her days. She had forgotten her poor paralyzed side and was reaching out for a fuller life, like more fortunate girls. Was it this hunger for change, and not some dread disease, that was taking the color from her face and the light from her eyes? Matts wished she could stay safely at home and find her way into the world where he lived so happily, a world that could exist without people and neither asked for nor needed the city. But she was a girl and perhaps that made it different.

"Of course you can go with me, Olga. Perhaps you could find work in the hotel, washing dishes. August told me his cousin from Grey Cloud waited on table there for a year." He did not speak of her crippled arm, and her shrinking dread of any mention of her affliction was

soothed by the certainty that his loving instinct would spare her that stab.

"Oh, would you help me, Matts? Would you ask father and mother to let me go?" she asked, the first light in her face he had seen there for many days. "Could we go to-morrow?" A little color crept into her cheeks as she waited eagerly for his answer.

Matts laughed, throwing his arm around her shoulder. "You are in a great hurry to leave us. All the young people seem to be trying to get away from New Sweden. Did I tell you that Karl went to Blackbird, a week ago, and Burghardt says he 's gone for good?"

Olga slipped from his protecting grasp and fell at his feet without a sound. The dusk had fallen, but Matts, bending over her in sudden terror, could see in the failing light that she had fainted. He picked her up and carried her the short distance to the little brook. He laid her on the grass at the edge of the stream and dashed cold water in her face. She recovered consciousness in a few minutes, and lay looking up in Matts's anxious face as if too spent to make the slightest move.

"Olga, dear, how you frightened me," he said, tenderly. "You should n't have let me go on talking when you were too tired to stand up. But I can carry you home."

Still she did not speak nor make any response to his words, though he could tell by her look that she was conscious and that she heard him. He wondered for a moment, uneasily, if Karl had something to do with her unhappiness. It was strange that she should have fainted just as his name was spoken. He felt sure that she had once been fond of Karl, but she could not have seen him for months, except on the day of the accident, and certainly Karl had never shown any interest in her. He quickly dismissed the possibility that the young man had any part in Olga's trouble. She was not strong, and she wanted to get

away from home. He would see that she had her wish. There might be some American family in Red Falls that would give her a dollar a week to do their housework.

He bent over to lift her in his arms. He could not catch her expression in the deepening darkness, but he could feel that she was helping herself, and she insisted, though without a word, on standing upon her feet. He kept a supporting arm round her and they started slowly down the road toward the farm. Their path was like a black cut between walls of trees, with the pale arch of the heavens above. The delicate fragrance of the cooling earth filled the air. One by one, the stars were beginning to shine as though pushing their way noiselessly through an obscuring curtain.

Matts talked cheerfully about Red Falls and plans for the future, covering her melancholy silence with a gossamer of hopeful words. They came out of the woods into an open field, where the stubble stood stiff and erect like pigmy sentinels. On the horizon at their left rose the moon, a little past the full, but glowing and golden in the soft October haze. Olga stopped as she saw its light at their feet.

"Matts, will you forgive me for frightening you?" she said, leaning her head against his arm. "I 'm better now. You are such a good brother."

Matts, knowing how difficult words were to her, made some comforting reply and they went on, his arm around her, like lovers walking in the moonlight. Olga felt, for the first time since the dark moment of her parting with Karl, that it might be possible for her to go on living. To her alone in the little community, the day of Jensen's death had been a day of personal tragedy. The rattle and whirr of the thresher would never again bring to her thoughts of the birth of plenty, but of the death of hope.

As she drew nearer home, her desolate heart warmed

with the feeling that as long as she could share her life with Matts, she was not quite alone. Brigitta and Nils, in spite of family loyalty, hardly counted in her thoughts. The stolid silence of well-meaning brings no healing to the suffering creature. The wounded, craving heart needs the word and expression of affection, and Matts alone had that priceless gift to give her.

When they neared the door, he bent over and kissed her, saying, "You are going to be happy now, Olga," with an air of bright promise that seemed to create a pale ghost of itself within her. She trembled a moment, remembering other kisses, but she resolutely put away the thought of them and looked up at him with a courage even he could not divine.

"Yes, Matts, I am going to be happy now," she repeated after him. "I 'll go away for a time and get strong again. But, Matts," she leaned up against him a moment as if her new-found strength were leaving her, "dear Matts, you 'll never forget me? You 'll always love me and help me?"

Matts was touched to the heart. He could see her face in the bright moonlight as she lifted it to him. Her look had all the helpless appeal of a child, with the undercurrent of tragic expression natural to her. He touched her hair gently with his hand and spoke to her as he might have spoken to Christina.

"Olga, you know you never can get rid of me. You 're the nicest sister I have, and I 'm your loving brother as long as I live. So there, now! You 're not going to worry about that."

She caught his spirit and laughed a little, on the edge of tears, but her look was more normal and Matts's heart lightened. With a whispered good-night, she tiptoed into the darkened house, while he went out to his summer bed on the hay in the barn. She soon slept, and for the first

night in weeks her pillow was not wet with tears. But Matts lay for long in front of the little window in the loft, watching the delicate shadows on the blanched ground gradually shorten, as though drawing into themselves, and then slowly lengthen again under the slanting rays of the sinking moon. When he finally fell asleep, the beauties of the earth and the sorrows of the men and women who lived on it held about equal share in his thought.

## CHAPTER XVII

Olga found a place to work in Red Falls — not at the hotel, but in the family of the miller, who, in return for Olga's services for the winter, agreed to grind the Swenson wheat and corn without commission. Olga looked crestfallen at the thought of such wages, but Matts, who had sold part of his load of wheat, slipped five big silver dollars into her hand and told her she should have more when he next brought wheat to be shipped. She had never seen so much money at one time before, and excitement at the prospect of having the spending of such a sum brought color to her pale cheeks. She was full of interest in everything in the town — in the gristmill, the two stores, the new creamery just starting to buy cream from the farmers and to make butter, and in the scattered wooden houses, set in neat yards and sheltered from the street by rows of maple trees.

But when the time came for Matts to start on his long thirty-mile ride back to New Sweden, her face clouded and she could hardly bear to let him go. She rode with him part of the way, sitting on the sacks of bran and shorts which he was carrying back to feed the calves and the milch cows during the winter. She sent messages to Nils and Brigitta, and talked of coming home in the spring. She made Matts promise to write to her often. Not until she had climbed out of the wagon and stood on the road, did she speak of what lay closest to the heart of both.

"You don't need to worry about me, Matts," she said, looking straight at him. "I am all right now, and you made me so." The tears filled her eyes and rolled down

her cheeks as she spoke, but she smiled through them and watched him go, still smiling.

Near the end of his trip, Matts stopped a few minutes at the Jensen farm to tell Oscar that he was coming the next day to go bee-hunting. The children were full of joy and excitement at the prospect.

"They'll all have to go," said Mrs. Jensen as she stood by the wagon with the baby in her arms. "They've talked about this since the first day they saw you."

The next day, when Matts reached the Jensen house after walking the seven miles in the early morning, he found the whole family, Mrs. Jensen and the baby included, ready to start for the woods. Mrs. Jensen wore a fresh dress and her dusky hair was done in a soft coil at the base of her neck. As soon as Matts came into the cabin, little Jens put his hand gently on his mother's head as she sat with the baby in her lap, and said to him, "Is n't it nice? Mother never fixed it that way before, but she wanted it pretty for the bee hunt."

Mrs. Jensen blushed crimson and pretended not to hear. Then with the ready wit and quick command of herself Matts had admired in her before, she looked up with a laugh and said, "The children think I am old and plain, so I try to make them believe that I am not too ugly. A little work with a comb is all they want." She lifted her hand to her hair as if to show him how easily the change was made.

At Matts's look of admiration, she paled a little and forced herself to turn away. Only the baby felt a change in the sudden tightening of her arms around him and a nervous hurry in her preparations.

When they set out for the woods, the children carried three pails, two clean ones for the honey they hoped to find and a battered one for the smudge with which Matts planned to drive the bees from the tree while he stole

the stored-up sweets. Matts insisted that the baby ride on his shoulders. The child's short legs hugged his neck and his hands clutched at Matts's mop of hair to steady himself.

They walked in a straggling group through the woods back of the clearing. The boys led the way, swinging their big pails jauntily. Rolf had to lean over sideways to keep his from dragging on the ground, but he was eager not to be outdone by his older brothers. Christina came next, picking such late flowers as still, half withered, grew in the open places. Matts, with the baby and the can of milk, followed her.

They stopped at last under a big, half-dead tree with a rotted opening about twenty feet from the ground, where a limb had once grown. Matts set the baby down some distance away, and Mrs. Jensen stayed with him, where she could watch what happened and at the same time be safe from possible attacks of angry bees.

Matts and the boys built a fire of dead twigs and dried grass in the old pail. When it was well started, they threw damp leaves on the flames until billows of suffocating smoke, flame-edged and heavy, began to roll out of the top. Then they set the pail hastily at the foot of the tree, which had a hollow like a chimney running up its centre. With the help of a grain sack, which Matts had brought along, they guided the fumes into this cavity. Matts left Oscar and the boys to feed the fire and keep the smoke pouring out, while he stepped back a little to see what was happening above. A tiny thread of smoke was already wavering out of the opening over his head. It grew rapidly larger, and very soon began to be darkened by the winged bodies of myriads of bees, flying in a crowding procession from the choking hive to freedom and safety without.

Matts shouted to Christina and the little boys to keep the smudge burning while he and Oscar were going up

the tree. He had tied the larger of the pails to his shoulder and had stuck a big knife in his belt. He quickly climbed up the first fifteen feet of the trunk and then cautiously approached the hole. The bees were still hurrying out, but many of them fell when they reached the air, as if they had been borne along, not by the beat of their own wings, but by the rush of their more vigorous companions. Matts waited a moment, until only a few half-overcome stragglers were left climbing up the inner sides of the opening. Then he gave the signal to those below to take away the smudge. He unfastened the pail from his shoulder and tied it securely to a limb just below the hole. Then, balancing himself on another limb, he leaned over until a third of his body had disappeared in the hollow. In a moment he reappeared, grasping in his two hands a great, white, waxy mass from which streamed long threads, shining and golden like the hair of an enchanted princess. He dropped this quickly in the pail and dove into the tree again for more. In a few minutes his own pail was full, and he shifted it farther out on the limb and tied Oscar's empty one next the tree. Oscar, meanwhile, just below him, was nervously striking at the bees which were recovering and had begun to light here and there on the trunk of the tree and to climb back toward the hive.

Matts was scraping the honey from his hands on the edge of the pail, after bringing up another great handful of the sweet stuff, when he noticed what Oscar was doing.

"Don't touch them," he cried, warningly. "If you keep quiet they won't bother you."

Oscar evidently did not heed Matts's advice, for he suddenly gave a muffled scream and put his hand to his face. A goaded and angry bee had stung him, and in the recoil of pain he had nearly lost his hold on the tree. Matts leaned over and called to the groaning boy, "Go

down and throw the rope up to me. I 'm nearly ready to let down the pails."

Oscar climbed hurriedly down. The pain of his sting had begun to subside and he proudly exhibited the swelling on his cheek to his mother, who had run up and was waiting anxiously for him at the foot of the tree. He made light of the accident to her, and, hastily picking up the rope for which he had come, slung the coil over his arm. Since he was not quite tall enough to throw it up to Matts, he had to climb the tree again, brushing occasional clinging bees from the trunk with a raveled end of the rope as he went.

Matts, warning those below to watch out, threw down the big knife, which was sticky with honey. Then he scraped off his hands as well as he could, and tying the rope to the nearest pail, lowered it slowly to Oscar who had scrambled down in time to receive it. The second pail was lowered in the same way. Then Oscar untied the rope from the handle and Matts, coiling it up, flung it far out from the tree, so that it should not fall either on the pails or on the watchers below. He slid down quickly himself, jumping lightly to the ground from the last branch.

The children were grouped in a joyous circle round the pails. With their fingers they were scooping up the honey which had overflowed and run down over the edge.

"I brought the bread so they could eat some honey now, while it still seems new and wonderful," said Mrs. Jensen, smiling at their happy faces.

Matts looked at her in delight. Who else among the women of New Sweden would have had such a thought! His own imagination was not to be outdone. He turned to the children.

"I know a place," he said, mysteriously, "where the fairies of these woods come each night when the first dew falls to eat sweet honey like this. Would you like

to eat your honey there?" To the chorus of joyous assent he answered by putting his finger to his lips for silence, and led them, tiptoeing, through the trees. He carried the two pails of honey and kept looking back, forming with his mouth strange words which conveyed no meaning to the children but increased their sense of something wonderful about to happen.

They presently came to a pretty, open place, surrounded by trees and hedged in by hazel bushes loaded with nuts. The long, yellowed grass was full of autumn flowers, dried on their stems but still erect and rich with color. Matts set down his pails and looked around at the children. His expression was one of disappointment.

"We are too early for the fairies," he said. "They wait for the evening dew, but their little chairs are here, all ready." He pointed to some small mushrooms half hidden in the grass. The children looked at them, uncertain what to think. Christina stood beside Matts as he knelt in the grass by the mushrooms, telling the little boys about many kinds of fairy furniture. She put her arm round his neck and leaned trustingly against him.

"Dear Matts," she said, touching his cheek softly with her hand as if hardly conscious of what she was doing.

Matts felt a tender thrill through his whole being. The care-free, happy day, the affection for him which he saw in every face, had worked upon his sensitive nature until it seemed to him that these children in their helplessness had become his dearest charge and responsibility. Could life hold any greater joy than helping to make the way easier for them?

He glanced up and caught Mrs. Jensen's look upon him. There was in it the same expression which had startled him once or twice before, a radiant glow of feeling that seemed to play about her face like a flame. He

could not turn his eyes from her as he saw the change wrought by her consciousness of his fixed gaze. For a flashing moment, something intimate and profound seemed to pass between them; then a veil fell, as if her spirit, in sharp uncertainty, had withdrawn. But that moment's interchange left her flushed and trembling, and made Matts fumble in his effort to recover the lost thread of his tale to the children.

When the story was finished, the children, at Matts's direction, sat in a fairy ring, and ate bread spread with honey and drank rich milk from the can. The baby shouted with joy, and the other children were full of the picnic happiness which needs both food and the great outdoors to be complete. Matts and Mrs. Jensen said little and avoided each other's eyes.

When they reached the clearing, they saw that Mrs. Jensen's ox had been returned, and was standing tied to the side of the barn. Burghardt, who had been using the animal, was walking between the house and the barn as if on an inspection of the place.

"Burghardt has brought back the ox!" cried Oscar. He ran across the rough potato patch at top speed.

Burghardt walked to meet the approaching group. He looked surprised when he saw Matts.

"Been getting honey?" he asked, as he saw the two pails, full almost to the brim. "Your mother 'll be glad to see that coming home."

"This honey is n't for my mother. It 's for Mrs. Jensen," answered Matts, with a strange sinking feeling as he saw Burghardt's look of suspicion.

"Is n't Oscar smart enough to get honey for his mother?" Burghardt went on, as his eye traveled from Matts to Mrs. Jensen and back again.

"He will be, after to-day," answered Matts, trying to speak lightly. "Someone had to show him how. Did you

see the sting he got? His cheek is swollen to twice its size."

But Burghardt showed no interest in Oscar's cheek and turned instead to Mrs. Jensen, as if about to question her. She was, however, more self-possessed than Matts and faced him calmly, speaking before he had a chance.

"I am glad you brought the ox, at last," she said, and added sharply, "You promised him for a week ago when we needed him to haul the wood. Oscar had to carry some in on a sled to keep the stove going."

Burghardt looked at her, astonished. How did she dare to talk that way to him? He was doing her a kindness in using her ox. She had better be careful what she said to the richest man in New Sweden. Probably she was scheming to get that big, lazy Matts to run her farm for her. No one would ever marry her, of course, with all those children, but there were other ways of getting a man to work for you. A sly leer rested on Burghardt's heavy face as he looked at the two. This would be a good piece of news to pass over the counter at the store. He almost forgot his anger at the woman as he thought of it. He changed the subject and remarked amiably, "I have been looking over your land while I was waiting for you. I think you can sell it for a good price when you get a little more cleared."

"Oh, no," cried Mrs. Jensen, with a sudden burst of feeling. "I don't want to sell it! I want a home."

"But you can't have a home without a man," went on Burghardt, watching her closely, "and you haven't any man."

Mrs. Jensen flushed at his unexpected words and rude stare, and for a moment lost her self-possession.

"I don't want any man," she began, her heart beating fast. Then she added, more quietly, "I have Oscar and he is almost a man."

By this time she had herself well enough in hand not to look at Matts, who stood silent, still holding the pails of honey. Burghardt, observing him closely, saw him move toward her impulsively as if in her defense, and then as quickly check himself. The storekeeper's exultation over what he had seen was great enough to make him willing to follow Mrs. Jensen's lead.

"Yes, Oscar is quite a man," he said, as he walked with Mrs. Jensen and Matts toward the house. "He can drive an ox better than some men I know."

Burghardt lingered a little longer, and then remarked, "It 's about time for me to be getting back to the store. The old woman 's looking out for it, but she 'll be wanting to go upstairs and cook the supper."

"I must go, too," said Matts. "We can walk as far as the road together." His good-bye was hardly more than a word. His glance just brushed Mrs. Jensen's face as he turned to go. He could see that she was deeply disturbed, but in her look there was no invitation to stay. When they were once outside, Burghardt walked along leisurely beside Matts's impatient stride.

"Nice little woman, that Jensen woman," he said, looking at Matts out of the corner of his eye. "There 'd be plenty of fellows after her if it was n't for those children. Maybe there 'll be someone after her anyway. Don't you think so?"

A sudden sick disgust swept over Matts, poisoning the memory of his happy and innocent day. Must a woman without a husband always be the prey of low minds like Burghardt's? Was it impossible for him to love and be loved by this helpless family without the corrupting breath of gossip blowing upon them? He turned north toward home without an answering word.

## CHAPTER XVIII

The Johnson baby came in February and Mrs. Jensen was sent for hurriedly, in the night. She expected to be gone only a week, but Mrs. Johnson, who had had eight children with no more difficulty than Johnson's prize milch cow had with calves, suddenly developed serious trouble and could not leave her bed. When she got better, the old grandmother was taken sick. Though her shrunken frame still imprisoned the failing breath of life, she was helpless as an infant and could not be cared for by Mrs. Johnson, who had barely strength enough to look out for herself and the baby.

As a result, Mrs. Jensen's week of absence had already extended to a month, and, except for short visits from their mother, Oscar and Christina had managed the home themselves. Matts had gone in to see how they were whenever he went by on his way to the store, and some of the neighbors had sent cooked food for the children. But in the main they had had to depend on the competence which hardship develops so early in the children of the poor.

One day, when Matts stopped at the cabin, he found Christina struggling with the baby, who had begun to develop a blind temper like his father's and was growing too vigorous for her young strength. He was screaming and kicking in her arms and would not let her either dress or feed him. She was very quiet with him, speaking soothingly, but as Matts came into the room he saw that she was tying the child's arms and legs with a small rope which one of the boys had brought her. When he was no longer able to strike at her, she bent over him, her mouth

close to his ear so that his screams should not drown her words, and said firmly, "When you are a good boy, I will untie you."

She looked up and saw Matts at the door. She blushed deeply and her lip trembled. They both remembered the night when she had learned how to deal with a Jensen rage.

"He is not always like this," she said, when she had put the baby on the bed and welcomed Matts. "Since mother has gone, he is much worse. Do you think it is right for me to tie him? I am not strong enough to hold him, and I am afraid he will hurt himself." There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. Matts's heart was wrung at the sight of this young creature, struggling with burdens beyond her years. He drew her to his side and hugged her for answer.

"Everything you do is right, Christina," he said. "See what I have brought you."

He opened the door for a moment and drew in a sled made of barrel staves, which he had built for the boys. The baby was interested and stopped screaming at once. Christina took him up, freed him from the rope and dressed him, without any further objection on his part. Matts, meanwhile, pointed out to the boys the fine points of the new sled. They were all eager to try it at once, and hastily put on caps and coats. Matts offered to take them on the ox-sled as far as the blacksmith shop, back of which was a steep hill, and let them test its sliding qualities. The man prematurely born in Oscar hesitated for a moment; he looked inquiringly at Christina and asked, "Could you wait till I get back for the extra pail of water?" At her smiling nod, the joyous boy took full possession; he was out of the cabin and pushing the sled over the snow before the others had even started.

Christina's eyes followed the shouting boys wistfully

as they ran after Oscar, but she sat down by the table and began to feed the baby without a word. The look of delicate sadness, which was characteristic of her, seemed to Matts to have deepened under the responsibility of the past month, and an expression of anxiety, unnatural in one so young, hung like a shadow over her eyes. He watched her uneasily.

"If I stayed and took care of the baby, would you go with the boys?" he asked.

For a moment she had the expression of a radiant child, but she almost instantly quieted and said, "No, Matts, you ought not to stay. I know you just want to make me happy."

But that flash of joy decided Matts.

"You go," he said. "I 'm in no hurry, and the baby and I 'll get the water."

"Oh, would you?" she cried. "It 's so heavy for Oscar, I hate to have him carry it. Oh, I love you, dear Matts, for wanting to help us all the time!" She threw her arms round his neck in a quick embrace before she hurriedly put on a cap and scarf. Then she rushed out to overtake the boys, shouting a joyous good-bye as she went.

A month later, Matts was making his weekly visit to the store. When he got his mail, he found with his weekly paper a letter in a large envelope, postmarked at the boyhood home of his father in Sweden. He tried to take it from Burghardt's hand as if it were of no importance, but he could hardly conceal his excitement.

"Your girl in Sweden must write you long letters," said Burghardt.

"Yes," answered Matts, who hardly heard what he said. "I think I 'll go along now, if you can give me the egg box."

When he had gone out, one of the men by the stove remarked, "I never heard about his girl in Sweden."

"Nor did anyone else," grinned Burghardt. "His girl 's up on the Jensen place."

"What? Christina? Why, she 's nothing but a child," observed a tall man who was trying to decide which of two axe-helves was the stronger.

"Her mother 'll do while he 's waiting for her to grow up," said Burghardt, winking at his hearers.

Nothing more was said on the subject, but the evil thought, like a heavy vapor, lingered in the room, filling the lungs of those who breathed it until they were ready to accept its fumes as the common air of every day.

Matts was riding homeward on the sled, holding the envelope in his hand. He had felt the weight of its contents and heard a little swish when he shook it, but he had not yet torn it open. He was going to give the Jensens the fun of doing that with him. If the oxen could have been hurried, they would have raced now, but he had to wait as patiently as he could until they made the turn at the Jensen road. No one was in sight, but he shouted to the children as he drew near, and they all came rushing out of the house to welcome him. He knew that Mrs. Jensen had returned home, but she was not with them.

"Where 's your mother?" he asked Christina, who was the first to reach the sled.

"She was helping Oscar haul the firewood the other day and the ox stepped on her foot; she can't walk," explained the girl. When she saw Matts's look of concern, she added, "It 's almost well now. She has to sit in a chair, but it does n't hurt any more."

The oxen stopped at the door, standing as motionless in the bright sunlight as the black shadow of the runners on the snow. Matts stepped off the sled, and held the envelope up before the children. With a great air of mystery, he said, "I 've got a secret in this package. Come

in the cabin and I 'll show it to you and your mother."

Inside, Mrs. Jensen was sitting by the table, with one foot carefully bandaged. She welcomed him with a smile. The children hung round her chair, explaining eagerly how the accident had happened, how brave she was, how she never cried once when Oscar was struggling to make the ox lift his foot, until she, laughing, begged them to let her tell the story or Matts would never again believe a word they said. Matts was struck anew with the change in the family since the October day that had made them fatherless. Their gayety and affection for each other had been brightness under a cloud before, but the cloud was lifted now and their inner selves were freed. More than that, they had a life and vigor, an intensity of feeling and expression, uncommon among the Swedes about him. The Lutheran tradition in which the community lived kept uppermost in mind the thought of sin and punishment, and children were never allowed to forget the seriousness of life. They were taught that man was not born to enjoy life, but to save his soul. Family affection itself was thought of, not as a source of happiness but as an instrument for salvation. He had never seen any display of tenderness in his own family. He could not remember that his mother had ever kissed him, and the few kisses he had given his sister had been so rare as to be almost sacramental. But to Mrs. Jensen expressions of affection seemed to be as natural as breathing. What had been, before Jensen's death, secret and tinged with pain, had become in this new freedom a warmth of loving on her part and on the children's that made the humble home in the rough cabin a strange and wonderful place to Matts.

When amid laughter and protests the story was finally told, and Mrs. Jensen had assured Matts that the foot would be well in a few days, the children turned to him to know what the mysterious envelope contained. Matts made

them all sit down quietly round the table while he told them his father's stories of the wheat that grew on the mountain side. When he had finished, he carefully opened the package and poured into a bowl the tiny grains with which it was filled. The boys looked at the wheat seed, familiar to them from babyhood, with sharp disappointment, but Matts's interest was unbounded. He lifted the kernels and inspected them carefully; he picked out the largest and the smallest ones; he noted their color and their weight. Mrs. Jensen watched his expressive face. He seemed to have forgotten everybody and everything except his dream of the magic wheat to be created from these humble seeds.

"Is it what you hoped?" she asked, half expecting that he would not hear her.

"Yes," he said, still absorbed. "Do you notice how small the kernels are? They are hardly more than half as large as those of the big ears I raised last year. Do you suppose it 's impossible to have early wheat and big wheat too?"

He pondered a little longer, rereading a letter which he had found enclosed with the seeds. Then he looked up. "I shall have to try that out this summer. Sorensen writes me in this letter that the straw is very short. The whole plant is only about two feet high, so that it does not yield much fodder for the animals."

He laughed. "I wonder what Sorensen would say if he knew that in this country we burn the straw. He thinks, the longer the straw the better for the farmer. But of course in the mountains there are n't the heavy winds that lodge the wheat." He sifted the grains through his fingers, lovingly. "No, that short straw is good. It will stand up against both the wind and the hail." He seemed almost to be talking to himself. The children watched him, wondering at his interest in the little heap of seeds.

In another moment his face shone as if with an inner light. He opened his arms.

"You can all help me," he said, as if inviting them to a great adventure. "I 'm going to plant a few seeds each day, as soon as the frost is out of the ground. I 'll plant some in dry places, and some in wet places, and you can watch me do it. Jens here can put the stakes in and build a fence around the precious seeds. When the plant gets tall and blossoms, we 'll take the little yellow powder from one flower and put it on another, and then the new and wonderful seed can begin to grow."

Matts looked in triumph at the puzzled children.

"I 'll help," said Jens, a little uncertain, but ready to do anything with his beloved friend. He was followed by a chorus of eager offers.

Mrs. Jensen broke in timidly: "I don't know whether it would help if you planted some seed in our new-broken field? I remember hearing that sometimes the grain comes bigger in the fresh ground. We would watch it every day for you, and see that no harm came to it." There was a wistful appeal in her last words.

Matts hesitated a moment, then said decidedly, "It will be good to raise seeds as far apart as the two farms. What hurts one might not hurt the other. The ground will be soft in a few weeks now, and I 'll teach the boys how to get it ready for my seed."

Mrs. Jensen smiled. "Do you know, ever since you told us about your wheat, I 've wanted to have something to do with it. The boys and I will take care of that little garden as if it were a baby."

"It will be a baby," said Matts, happily, "a new and wonderful kind of baby. The time may come when you 'll be as proud of it as you are of this young man here."

He picked up Axel, who had recently learned to walk and was running round the room, tossed him in the air,

and set him on the table. But when he saw how perilously close the child was to the precious bowl of wheat, he put him back on the floor even more quickly than he had taken him up. He emptied the bowl into the envelope and, fastening it as well as he could, slipped it for safe-keeping into his pocket.

When he went, his expression had the beautiful clarity of one who, loving the whole world, lives intensely in the presence of a single absorbing idea. He sat on the rough sled, his mind elsewhere, watching the oxen pick their way on the road which had been made rough and difficult by early thawing and rapid refreezing. The hard labor of the spring planting lay ahead of him, but his thoughts were radiant with eager hope and happiness.

Long after he had gone, Mrs. Jensen sat by the table doing the household tasks that Christina could bring to her there. She was the centre of a circle of laughing and happy children and her hands were occupied with the pressing work of the day, but her face was clouded by a deep sadness, which one moment yearned for a more complete fulfillment and the next lost itself in tender humility.

## CHAPTER XIX

Matts sowed his two kinds of wheat, both in his own plot at home and in the plot Mrs. Jensen and the boys prepared for him in their clearing. He planted a few grains, at intervals of three days, until he had made four different plantings. Then he marked each group with fresh chips of wood, on which he wrote symbols mysterious to anyone else, but full of meaning to himself. Whatever the work of the day might be, he was sure to pass the little square once or twice and watch each inch of growth in the green shoots and the heading tip. Mrs. Jensen was no less eager than he with the grain near her cabin, and she and Christina vied with each other to keep it free of weeds and to prevent animals from straying across it.

Adolph Johnson had plowed and harrowed her fields and had sowed her wheat. She and the children had done everything else. They had put in the potatoes and the other vegetables, and had planted the corn which would provide so much of the food for them and for their animals the next winter. A baby had been born on the Palmgren farm in April, and after a week of nursing there Mrs. Jensen had come back with a young pig, which Oscar penned inside the barn in a shelter of boughs. As the shoat grew older and stronger, he was constantly breaking through the frail fence. The boys seemed to spend all their time either cutting heavier posts to hold him or driving him into his narrow quarters after happy roamings in the fields. But they could comfort themselves with the thought of hams and bacon hanging in a row from the rafters when the snow should begin to fly.

Oscar and his ox had worked a week for the blacksmith, and had, in return, the promise of clothes for school in the fall. The cow had a new calf; there was plenty of milk and bread and butter for hungry children. To Christina and the boys there seemed no reason to worry about the future, and Mrs. Jensen, who had faced suffering so much worse, could think of poverty and deprivation without dread. Oscar was already showing some of his father's driving energy, and worked long hours hoeing in the hot summer sun or cutting hay in the little winding meadows by the brook and along the roadside where no one mowed. By the middle of July, with the help of his mother and the other children, Oscar had enough hay stacked by the barn to feed the cow till the next spring. With corn stalks and straw, they hoped to keep the ox in condition to haul their wood in the fall, and to be hired out afterward to a lumber camp for the winter.

Matts was so busy that they saw very little of him. His father was planting more land and they both had to work early and late to use every day of the short season to advantage. But Mrs. Jensen knew well that when the wheat began to head they would see him, and she watched the grain develop, counting the days until the flowers should ripen.

A little after the middle of July, Matts noticed that the first planting of his mountain wheat was heading rapidly, and would mature so long before the other wheat that he could not use it to cross-fertilize. He must allow self-pollination of those heads. He felt sure they would change somewhat in the new surroundings, even without crossing, and the seed he would have to work with another year would be a little different. But at the same time he observed, to his joy, that the first planting of the native wheat and the second of the Swedish wheat would come to maturity together. As the ears swelled and the glumes

spread a little, he visited the place twice and sometimes three times a day, not to miss the moment of ripening. His father was impatient at such a waste of time, and thought bitterly that, if it were not for his nagging, Matts would be the loafer some of the neighbors thought he was.

One still, warm night, after he had carefully inspected the heads, Matts felt sure the time had come to make the great experiment. He would do the crossing the next morning. As he prepared the few tools he would need, his hands trembled with excitement. He smiled a little at his own emotion, but his heart beat none the less rapidly. He had brought a thin, springy strip of metal from the blacksmith's shop a week before. He filed it down at either end to a fine point and then doubled it over, so that it could be used like a pair of tiny forceps. He borrowed the small scissors which had been brought from Sweden in his mother's wedding chest and sharpened so many times that the blades were wearing thin. As a special favor, he begged from Brigitta some light cloth which she had laid away to use for cheese bags.

In the morning he started for the field just as the rim of the sun appeared. The big red orb was rising, hot and dazzling, in a still world. It seemed to be moved by an invisible mechanism which was driving it upward, in a path that bore no relation to the earth. The birds were silent, as though they were saving their songs for the coolness of the twilight; and the baked fields lay quiet, brooding on the miracle of growth beneath their surface. The slanting rays of the sun edged the fields with jeweled meshes where the cobwebs held the dew. Matts stepped so as not to break the fairy strands which stretched from bush to blade of grass, holding at each centre an intricate pattern of silver threads.

The two kinds of wheat stood side by side, in short rows of successive plantings. The Swedish wheat, with

its short, sturdy stalk, held small, bearded ears firmly upright at its top. The tall, graceful native grain stooped a little, as if the heavy heads were a greater burden than the stem could bear. Both rows were growing vigorously and neither insect nor fungus pest had yet attacked them.

Matts stood between the rows he planned to cross. Each row was to be treated as male parent of the opposite row, and to be itself fertilized with its neighbor's pollen. Most deft and delicate work was necessary to prevent self-pollination of the ripening flowers as they were being handled. Matts began by stripping off the basal spikelets of the ears and cutting away the upper third of the head as well. The central spikelets held the best grains and must be preserved. The discarded ones, above and below, would only rob them of their nourishment and must be sacrificed. So much of the process Matts knew from experience and observation. The other steps he took were based on the reading and thinking of the past winter, when, hour after hour, he had pondered on the problems ahead of him.

From the spikelets left on the stalk, Matts cut off the less vigorous flowers until he had only about twenty on a head. He had constantly to remind himself, as he thus ruthlessly destroyed the products of his cherished seed, that the perfect kernel would grow best when freed from the necessity of sharing with the less perfect the sunlight, the water, and the food. After the plants on each row were thus reduced to little tufts of flowers at the top of the stems, Matts began by gently inserting the point of his homemade forceps between the upper margins of the inner and outer chaffy scales enclosing each flower. He released his hold of the forceps slightly and the flower opened, exposing to his sight the feathery stigma and the three anthers, ready to burst and scatter their yellow, fertilizing dust. He carefully pinched off the anthers, without

breaking them open, and laid them on a piece of paper. If, by any chance, as he opened one after the other, his forceps slipped and broke the delicate case enclosing the pollen, that flower he cut off and threw away. The products of self-pollination were not what he was seeking. Those he could see wherever he looked. Every field was green with grain which was fertilized within its own protecting sheath.

The miracle seed, which Matts dreamed of creating, could not be formed that way.

When one cluster of flowers in each row was thus stripped of its anthers, Matts began the more delicate task of placing the pollen from one plant on the stigma of another. The little papers of yellow anthers lay at the base of the two stalks, warm in the July sun. Not a breath of air was stirring, and when, now and then, a tiny anther under the stimulus of the sun opened and spilled some of its precious, life-giving contents, the pollen did not scatter, but lay on the white surface of the paper, ready for the light touch of the forceps.

Matts's heart was beating fast as he lifted the paper that lay at the foot of the stocky Swedish plant. He carried it carefully to the row of native wheat, where the tall green stalk, although freed of two thirds of its spikelets, still hung its heavy head. One by one he reopened the flowers from which he had cut away the anthers, and dusted the pollen from the paper he held over the feathery style at the centre. His hand was steady and controlled at its exacting task: his spirit exulted. The great moment of his life had come. Through him the tiny seed had left its mountain home where for centuries it had been yielding a harvest, meagre indeed, but ripe in season for safe gathering, and had crossed the ocean to put forth its roots and stem in a new country. His own hands were fusing its sturdy virtues with those of a more

richly endowed grain which carried promise of food for untold multitudes in its heavy ears. As Matts stood there in his shabby clothes, his bare feet brown with the dust of the field, his unkempt hair pushed back from his forehead, his hands ready for the delicate work they must do, he was one with the poets and creators of the ages. The light that shone in his eyes must have illuminated the face of every man who ever struggled to remake his world and to build up a better one about him. The passion to set new forces free, which inspired him, may have been the driving force of the creator of being itself.

When he had fertilized all the flowers on the first spike, Matts took a small square of the cloth he had brought with him and tied it carefully over the head. The rudely opened flowers must be shielded from the entrance of any chance pollen which might be floating in the air. The stalk bent dangerously under the weight of the protective covering, and leaned on its neighbors. Matts considered it for a moment, uncertain what to do. He turned to the other row and fertilized the flowers on the short Swedish stalk with the pollen from the native wheat, and tied its top in turn with the cotton cloth. It drooped also, though not so low as the taller, slenderer stalk. Matts looked at the two; then he slipped his forceps into his pocket and went back to the barn for his axe.

His father was just starting out with a hoe, ready to work in the corn field.

"Where are you going with that axe?" he asked.

"I must cut some stakes," answered Matts, only half hearing what was said, like a child spoken to suddenly in the midst of its play.

"They can wait till a rainy day," said his father, puzzled at the need of stakes in corn-cultivating time. "Get your hoe and come over to the east field."

Matts looked blankly at his father and, without

answering, went into the barn again, axe in hand. Nils started toward the field, expecting to be overtaken by Matts after he had put the axe away. He caught the whir of the grindstone and, looking back, saw Matts, his axe shiny with sharpening, come out of the barn and go in the direction of the woods beyond the wheat field.

Nils shook his head.

"Matts is like a crazy man," he thought. "One minute he 'll milk the cow, and the next he 'll be staring at the milk pail as if he 'd never seen one before. He 's forgotten there is any corn to hoe on this farm." He walked on, wondering why he had not been blessed with a nice, steady son like August Lindblom, who never wanted to read, but would hoe all day without saying a word or looking at anything except the weeds under his feet.

Matts cut a great armful of stakes and carried them to the edge of the plot. He returned to his work of cross-pollinating the flowers, and as he completed each cluster, he tied the stalk to a pole so that the head would not droop. He forgot to go back for his dinner and worked all through the long, hot day. When it became too dusky to see well, the work was still not finished. Some heads would have to wait until to-morrow for this meddler with their ancestral ways.

Matts straightened up and looked happily at the two rows, which had the appearance of shapeless white daisies tied primly in a garden. The plant he had just finished he fastened to a stake, handling it as tenderly as though it had been a conscious creature. He could hardly tear himself away. The broad fields of waving green that lay between him and the house were of little interest to him. The long rows of corn, rustling in a faint evening breeze, were food for pigs and cattle; but this little patch on which his eyes lingered held the mystery and promise of the unknown. He had never before been so filled with a

sense of the richness of life. It was with a long-drawn sigh that he finally forced himself to pick up his tools and start back to the house.

His mother was full of questions as to why he had not come in to dinner, and his father full of complaint because he had not appeared to hoe the corn. Matts tried to tell them what he had been doing, but they showed no interest. They could think only of the interruption to the work of the day, which his strange use of valuable time had brought.

Matts was undisturbed.

"I can't hoe to-morrow, either," he said, cheerfully. "The plants won't wait, and if the pollen has once broken, all my work is useless."

"Work!" grunted Nils. "You don't know what work is! Always got your eyes somewhere else."

"Well, father," laughed Matts, too happy to pay much attention to the disapproval of his parents, "boys are a wild lot, and I do this instead of getting drunk."

Nils, who was washing his face in preparation for supper, turned to him, the roller towel held in his hand and water still trickling down his face.

"I believe that 's the truth," he said, wonderingly. "It 's your way of getting drunk." He spoke as if the new idea brought him comfort. It made the strangeness in his son seem not very different from faults in other men's sons. The only mystery was what Matts could see in such a foolish use of time. Nils could understand a taste for alcohol; but a liking for reading and for fussing with wheat seed — ! He said no more about the hoeing, and the three ate their supper in silence.

Matts's mind, meanwhile, was in a tumult of plans for trying out new crossings and for bettering his method. As he sat quietly eating, his mother saw a brightening of expression now and then, which she thought was pleasure

in his food. She could not know that it was a bursting through to the surface of an inner happiness which was independent of the senses, which could exist in poverty and want as well as in comfort and plenty.

Nils ate his bread and milk, trying to remember how many rows of corn he had hoed that day and how many would have to be hoed to-morrow. He felt a dull resentment that Matts did not show more interest in the corn. Matts was twenty-four years old now, and could not be ordered around like a boy. He would probably be marrying one of these days and be no more use to his family. Nils wondered what kind of girl Matts would like. He had certainly never looked twice at any girl in New Sweden. Nils wished he would pick Anna Johnson. She could work in the fields as well as any man and could handle a scythe better than her father. But the young people nowadays did not ask their parents whom to marry, and he supposed Matts would be like the rest. He hoped Olga would stay at home, anyway.

Olga had not come back in the spring as she had promised. The miller's wife had begged her to stay, and she wrote that she would come back the next winter, instead. Matts had seen her only once, but her letters sounded happy. They were full of joy in the real money she was getting every week now and in the new dresses she was buying with it. Matts answered her letters for the family, but he did not put in all the messages for her from his father. Nils thought she ought to send her money home, but Matts never wrote that. Olga was beginning to care again how she looked. Let her keep her money and use it to make herself beautiful. Perhaps the untroubled Olga of his childhood memories would come back.

## CHAPTER XX

EARLY the next morning, Matts was at work on the last of the unfertilized plants. In two hours they were finished, and the stalk at the end of the line fastened firmly to a stake. Matts inspected the other plantings and opened a few of the still undeveloped flowers. They were so nearly ripe that, if the hot weather held, they would be ready for crossing in about a week. He pondered over the probable chances of the different plantings. Would the first seed, put in the ground almost before the frost was out of it, be slower to mature than the seeds sown in the warmer soil of a week later? Would the last planting, under the spur of its shorter season, give him the earlier-ripening grain for which he was hoping? Question after question, like the ever-mounting waters of a spring, forced its way into his mind. They would all have to wait until the slow process of growth in the tiny flowers, now muffled in white and mysteriously altered by him, should lay the answers in his hand.

After he had finished, Matts walked back to the house and called to his mother, who was at work inside, that he would not be back until nightfall. She looked up, but she did not ask him where he was going. As she passed the open door, moving about at her household tasks, she caught a glimpse of him on the main road going south.

The planting of the trial seed at the Jensen farm had been one day later than that on the Swenson farm, and Matts dared not risk waiting any longer. In another twenty-four hours the anthers might ripen and burst, and so make the ears useless for his purpose.

The world was clothed in green as he walked along, but he could see the beginning of that crisping of the leaves and grasses which makes midsummer in Minnesota so autumnal. Even sudden heavy rains cannot protect the vegetation from the fierce withering of the hot sun, which blazes high in the sky day after day. The corn leaps to meet it and the grain ripens as though at a magician's command; but the wayside foliage turns brown, and the vividness of the trees is touched with russet, like a vague shadow resting on their leaves.

Mrs. Jensen was alone in the cabin when Matts arrived. She had run to the door as soon as she heard his step.

"I 've been watching for you for several days," she said, her words full of joyous excitement. "I 've been so afraid you would be too late. I opened a flower, as you told me, and I was planning to send Oscar to-night to tell you that you must come at once." She was rapidly wiping her hands, wet with dishwashing, as she spoke. "The children are all picking wild plums by the brook. Even Christina went along to look out for the baby, who runs everywhere now, but I will help you. The dishes can wait."

She was in a happy flurry and would not listen to Matts when he said he could manage alone. He was glad to yield to her insistence, for her interest was like a current of fresh air to a man smothering in a sealed chamber. She was all eager questions as she went with him to search for the axe by the woodpile. She followed him to the field, and watched while he cut stakes from a pile of brush on the edge of the clearing.

When they reached the little marked plot, each carrying an armful of the sharp-pointed sticks, Matts exclaimed with joy at the appearance of the wheat. The new soil, fertile with the gathered humus of centuries and freshly enriched with the ashes of the burned brush

and roots of its stripped forest, had produced grain which was strong-stalked and loaded with vigorous spikelets. The ears bore promise of being so heavy when they were ripe that they would drag an ordinary straw to the ground.

Matts saw that some of the flowers had already fertilized themselves. These he cut off and threw away, in spite of Mrs. Jensen's anxious wish to have them saved.

"I have enough of those at home," he said, in explanation. "I don't want to spend any more time with them. They would only mix me up when the rest of the grain ripens."

He began the long, slow process of getting the plants ready for crossing. Mrs. Jensen watched him carefully and asked questions about what he did. She was soon able to strip the ears for him and leave only the twenty flowers he wished to keep. She went back to the house to get her own scissors, so they might both cut and trim at the same time.

Matts saw her returning with a smile of pleasure. She was the first person who had ever listened to his enthusiasms without making him feel that he was a queer fellow. She really wanted to help and he felt grateful to her for it. As he watched her, he thought how easily she ran, as lightly as Christina. She blushed as she saw his eyes upon her, and sobered to a walk.

They worked together all the afternoon. She was very quick with her hands, and Matts admired the increasing sureness with which she cut and trimmed. By two o'clock all the ears were ready for his forceps, and she stood beside him, waiting to help him further. Before Matts had a chance to ask her to do anything, she was holding the paper for the yellow anthers, handing him the scissors or the forceps when he needed them, tying up the fertilized heads in the cloth covering, and fastening the stems to the stakes. The two together were doing the work much more

rapidly than Matts had thought possible. They bent over the wheat hour after hour, growing ever more skillful. They spoke seldom, for fear their breath would scatter the ripe pollen in their hands, but even without words Matts became increasingly conscious of her nearness, her unfailing readiness for his next move, and her thought which seemed to match with his.

They were near the end of the rows. In their absorption, neither had spoken for some time. Mrs. Jensen stood at his side, holding the paper of anthers in her hand. She was watching not the plant but his face as he bent over the ear.

"You are wonderful," he said, gratefully. His eyes were intent on his work as he delicately dusted some pollen on the style of a flower and then, withdrawing his forceps, allowed the protective glumes to close again. "I wish I could have you to help me all the time," he added, impulsively.

"Oh, you could," she said softly, almost as though the words came without her willing them. "You could!"

He looked up startled, not so much by what she said as by the deep feeling in her voice. Her eyes were on his and there was a look in them that started his own heart to beating more rapidly. Once or twice he had caught her looking at him with a strange intensity, but the expression, drenched in turbid emotion, had hardly lasted for a breath and had quickly faded, leaving the face of friendly affection she had shown him from the first. But now her unveiled look was full upon him. She seemed to have forgotten who or where she was. She said nothing, but her eyes clung to his as if to read her fate there, and her lips trembled like a little child's at the beginning of tears.

He stared at her, glad for a moment at what he read there, and full of doubt and inner turmoil the next. A

wistful smile played on his young face. "Do you love me so much?" he half whispered.

She stood looking at him, as though waiting for a word that did not come. The utter self-forgetfulness of her first expression was broken up, as though by cross-currents of feeling. Her eyes searched his face yearningly. She still held the paper covered with the little yellow anthers, like tiny berries, ready to fertilize the next flower, but she had forgotten it. Her eyes fell before his look and she saw her laden hands dimly through slow, difficult tears which ran unnoticed down her cheeks.

Matts dropped his tools and put his arms tenderly about her.

"Do you really love me so much?" he repeated, his fair head bent over her dark one.

"No one in all the world could ever love you so much," she whispered in a stifled breath. "I have loved you from the first day I saw you. But you can never love me."

Her words asked no question. They seemed to express the sad acceptance of a fact, but she waited, breathless, as if her life depended on his answer.

"I love you, too," he whispered, "and I love the children. Would you like to have me come and take care of you and of them?"

She lifted her eyes and saw his smiling, tender look fixed upon her. The paper fell from her hands. Such a rapture of joy flashed across her face that he was dazzled.

"Oh, if you could love me and let me love you, I would give my whole life to make you happy!" Each word was a passionate caress.

Matts did not speak, but he answered the longing in her eyes by bending over and giving her the kiss of his deep affection. She was timid as a maid at the touch of his lips on hers, but she seized his hands and lavished her kisses on them. Matts was carried out of himself by her emotion.

For the first time he realized the richness of love a woman has to give to the man of her choice. With her always beside him to care for the things for which he cared, he need never be lonely or sad. And dear Christina and Jens would be his now, to love and care for!

The woman beside him clung to his hand a moment longer, in silence, then she raised her head and gently touched the stalk on which they had been working.

"This wheat will always be lovelier to me than any flower," she said. She looked at him with a timid smile. "You will want to finish the row, won't you?"

Matts felt a throb of joy. Even at this moment she could remember and love his work as well as himself! He spoke to her with a new freedom, as to an understanding comrade, while they worked slowly down the row. He was conscious of no thrill of passion, but of a depth of affection that promised well for a happy life. But she was a person transformed as she followed him, sensitive to his slightest need. Her eyes had the dreamy absorption of a girl, and her youth seemed to have come back to her in a rush. The affection of the defrauded years flowed out to him in a great flood on this day of fulfillment. She said little, but Matts felt her love like a warmth moving beside him.

Once he looked at her a little shyly.

"I can call you Lena, now," he said, half-questioning.

There was a tiny pang in her heart. It was the voice of the loving boy speaking to the older woman, when her ear craved the hot insistence of an equal love. Perhaps, in the intensity of her love for him, she asked too much. She could see that he lived a life apart from those about him. How could he love as others did? Let it be enough for her that he let her share his life. She knew well what a wealth of tenderness she had to give to him. His own love would grow to meet it, and she, who loved him so

well, could help him best by revering where others only smiled.

"Yes, dear Matts," she said, "that will be a sweet name to me now that you speak it. I have always hated it before to-day."

Matts marveled again at her difference from the women about her. Think of hating a name which meant nothing! He was touched that his calling her by that name would change it for her into sweetness, but for a moment he felt bewildered. Would he be able to walk in this new world of emotion without blundering, without destroying something precious? The woman's look of happiness steadied him. She seemed to ask only what he had to give, and to find joy in that.

"Dear Lena," he said, as he picked up an anther from the paper she held out to him, "you know I am a stupid man, and you must not expect too much of me."

His humility was dear to her, even when most incredible.

"You will never know how wonderful you are, and I 'm glad of it," she said, with her quick smile. "If you did, you would never look twice at me."

Matts smiled, too, and they worked on, happy in the companionship of doing, which plays so rich a part in the life of lovers.

Before they had quite finished, the children returned with bags full of plums. They ran out to the field to find their mother and to greet Matts. At a word of warning from him, they stood quietly a little distance off, so as not to jar the pollen, watching with breathless interest as each flower was treated. The baby was restless and Christina lifted him in her arms to keep him quiet. He was too heavy for her to hold long at a time, and she had to walk off with him so that he should not disturb the workers. She looked back longingly at the attentive circle by the

wheat. Matts noticed her as she went, and when he came to the last stalk he called Oscar to take care of Axel so that Christina might come close and see what he was doing.

The girl hurried back, aglow with gratitude and interest, and stood beside her mother. Matts explained over again what he was doing and why he was doing it. The boys had picked up some of the cut-off spikelets and examined the flowers as Matts talked. They pointed out to the eager Christina the style and the anthers. Matts had the warm certainty that, with this beloved family about him, he would never again be alone in his interests.

Not until the last ear was covered with cloth and tied to a stake, did any of them turn toward the house. Matts looked a question at Lena.

"Shall we tell them now?" he said to her.

She blushed and smiled. "You tell them for us both."

"What is it?" shouted Oscar, who had overheard their words.

Matts caught the hand of little Jens who stood beside him.

"Do you remember," he asked the child, "you said once you wished I could live with you always? What would you think if I told you that I was going to live with you always?"

"In our house?" asked Jens, bewildered. "For always?"

The other boys looked their doubts, but Christina threw her arms round Matts, crying, "Oh, darling Matts, you are never going away to leave us?"

Matts hugged her close for a moment.

"No," he said, smiling at Lena over the girl's head. "Your mother has told me I can stay with you always, and take care of you."

Christina turned to her mother.

"Yes," said Lena, in answer to the unspoken question in all the children's faces. "Matts is going to be your father now. He is so good and loves us all so much that he is coming here to live with us." She smiled as she spoke, but there were tears in her eyes. Christina kissed her mother tenderly.

"Dear, dear mother," she said, looking intently in her face, "are you going to be happy now?"

Lena's eyes overflowed at the girl's words. She and Christina had lived through tragic hours together, and each had an understanding of the other born of days and nights of suffering. Christina could see behind Lena's tears the dawn of a tremulous new happiness.

"If Matts is living with us," answered her mother, a smile trembling on her lips as she looked up at him, "do you think any of us can help being happy?"

The children clustered round Matts, full of joyous questions as to whether he must go home and get his box, or could stay with them now. They were disappointed when they were told that Matts might not come to them for some weeks. They learned that the minister had to marry their mother and Matts in the church, and that he could not do that until the banns had been read on three Sundays, as they were last year for Elise Nelson and Jorge Jorgeson. The boys were pleased at the thought that all the children would look at them with envy, as they had at the Nelsons when the banns were read, but they did not like to see Matts leave them. He promised that he would come often now.

"You see," he said, laughing. "I 'm going to be your father now, and you 've got to learn to obey me. I want you to know what a terrible ogre I am."

He chased Rolf, growling and making terrible faces from which the child ran in pretended fright. The others seized the pursuing Matts and had a wrestle with him,

which ended in Matts putting the three boys on the ground and holding them there. They all got up finally, covered with the dust of the yard but full of joyous laughter. Matts saw Lena looking at him with an expression he could not read. There was love in plenty in her eyes, but was there also doubt, uncertainty? Did she regret anything? He went up to her almost like a remorseful child.

"Was I too rough with them?" he said, as if asking forgiveness.

"Oh, no," she cried, "everything you do is right. It is only the rest of us who make mistakes." She leaned against him for a moment, hiding her eyes.

He lifted her face gently.

"I must go now," he said, and bent to kiss her. She suddenly threw her arms round his neck and kissed him repeatedly, as if a long repressed emotion had broken its bounds. Then as suddenly she tore herself from him and ran into the cabin.

The startled children looked from one to another, but said nothing. As if under a silencing spell, they walked with Matts to the road and watched him go. He hardly spoke either, but, instead, smiled his good-bye as he turned away.

In the cabin, Lena stood by the door, still trembling with emotion. "I love him so much, surely he will love me in time," she said to herself repeatedly, until the children came in again. Under the pressure of their homely needs, she was forced, still vibrant with the passion of her resurrected youth, to take up the old familiar tasks of her maturity and put aside her glorious hours for some less exacting time.

## CHAPTER XXI

News of Matts's approaching marriage met with universal disapproval.

"Just like such a crazy fool," said Burghardt, "loading himself down with a big family and a woman old enough to be his mother. Did n't need to marry her either, as I can see."

Brigitta thought Lena a schemer, who had looked around for some man to take care of her and had found Matts the easiest to get. Other women remembered their first suspicions of a woman who kept her mouth shut so tight, and decided she had planned this from the first minute she learned that Olaf was dead. Such a plain, dark little thing, too! They wondered that Matts had been taken in by her when there were so many pretty, fair girls in the neighborhood not yet married. They looked at Lena with hostile eyes when she came to church with Matts, the first Sunday the banns were read. Their rising dislike was not softened by the change in her. She had suddenly become beautiful — not with the beauty of skin and coloring, which they were accustomed to think necessary to good looks, but with a radiant glow, a vividness of expression, a bearing light and buoyant, which, belittle it as they might, they could not erase from their eyes. The men were uneasily aware of it too, and several of them during the service cast furtive glances toward the seat where she sat. Her appearance roused in them memories and echoes of long-buried and forgotten experience. Was it the early love light in the eyes of their own wives, who sat stolid and frowning across the aisle from them, or the vision of some dream woman, never

realized in the flesh, which was living again in their dulled minds as they stirred uneasily in their seats?

After the service was over, Lena tried as never before to make friends with these men and women who were watching her with such doubting faces. Some of them, for the Swensons' sake, spoke pleasantly to her, and one or two of the girls drew near, wondering if it was the way she did her hair that made her look so young and pretty. They planned to try it next Sunday for themselves. The pastor, feeling the criticism, went from group to group, reminding them that they were all neighbors in a little community and must judge kindly if they would be kindly judged. He mentioned no names, but they all knew whom he meant. The children's evident love for Matts and his for them did more than anything else to stay gossip and make the gossipers ready to accept this untoward marriage without further unpleasant words.

"Perhaps he loves children so much he could not wait to have some of his own," suggested one of the women with a smile. She had seen Matts's arm held protectingly round the shoulder of drowsy little Jens during the long sermon.

"Well, I give it up," said Mrs. Johnson. "He 's certainly marrying a good nurse. I 'm glad for her," she added, remembering a quiet voice and gentle hands which had eased her hours of suffering the winter before, "that she has a kind man to help her take care of those children. Adolph tells me that Jensen was a rough fellow, though I will say his head was never full of queer notions like Matts's."

But Matts neither knew nor cared that they talked and marveled without end. For the first time in his life, his ardent nature had found an outlet and could pour itself forth without restraint. The affection, warm from his heart, did not spread out like water, lost upon arid land,

but came back to him as a constant stream of love, fuller and deeper than any he had known. He cherished his Lena tenderly, and if he wondered now and then at the intensity of her feeling for him, he thought it was probably in the nature of woman to love more than man, since her life necessarily centred in the home while he had the world for his activities.

Two weeks after the wheat had been fertilized by Matts, he came over one morning to remove the protective covering from the heads in order to give a better chance for the ears to ripen. The wedding was ten days away, early enough for Matts to take charge of harvesting the crop of the Jensen farm. But nothing could have been more modest or less possessive than Matts's attitude. The little plot of experimental wheat he felt was his own. He would have defended it against an army. But the farm was Lena's and he was only one with the children in carrying out her orders. At first his delicacy — or indifference, she was puzzled for a time which to think it — was a source of pain to Lena and of real difficulty as well. Jensen had always decided what was to be done on the farm, and she knew only as much about its management as every observing farmer's wife must know. But she decided, after sleepless hours of uncertainty, that Matts's real life was in that world unknown to the rest of them, in which he lived apart. He toiled at the work of the farm for the sake of others, but his deepest concern was with his papers and his books and his dreams of working with the marvels of nature about him. She, who knew best how different he was from others and who revered him for being what he was, must shield him from the heavy burdens of a farmer's life. She and Oscar would never let him know what they were doing, but they would plan and manage so that he should work on the farm only as much as he wished, and be free to do other things.

"I can help him so much," she thought, as she lay long awake one night. "He 'll never know why he is so glad and does such wonderful things, but it will be because I 've loved him and protected him." Unshed tears of happiness lay in a film over her eyes. The mother love which was intertwined with the passion of her affection for him found comfort in the thought that she, to whom he was to bring so much, would in turn give him something no younger woman could give. She slept, dreaming that she held him in her arms, guarded and safe from the soul-destroying toil of pioneering in this new country.

Olga came home for the wedding. She was very thin, but her look of misery had lightened and she seemed glad to see them all once more. She had some new clothes, the envy of all the other girls, and their outspoken admiration and interest brought color and smiles to her face. She had learned American ways and American cooking from the miller's wife, an American who, five years before, had gone from St. Paul to teach in the country school at Red Falls and had shortly — to the great disgust of her family and friends — married the handsome young Swedish miller. Whatever misgivings she may herself have had vanished quickly after her marriage, and when she visited her family in the city, smiling and happy, better dressed and with more money to spend than any of her friends, they were forced to admit that their anxiety had been unnecessary. Olga's one effort was to be as like the miller's wife as possible, and Brigitta watched many of the new doings with silent disapproval. Olga cooked some of the new dishes she had learned, for her family to try. Neither Nils nor Brigitta would taste them, but Matts was full of enthusiasm and urged her to teach Lena, so that he might have such good food often.

"She won't let you teach her," said Brigitta, stealing occasional glances at the custard pie in front of Matts as

she ate her bread and milk. "I offered to give her my rule for making coffee cake, and she said she had no time for fancy dishes."

"You try her, anyway," said Matts, a happy assurance born of certainty in his voice.

Olga found Lena eager to learn anything that would give Matts pleasure. Her interest in Olga's skill warmed Olga to give a sisterly welcome to the new member of the family, which helped to make up to her for the unexpressed disappointment she felt in the others. Lena was less troubled by the evident disapproval of the church members, though they only showed the doubts and fears she herself had felt in burdening Matts's young life with the responsibilities of her maturity, because she saw how little his happiness depended on any people except those closely bound to him. She would make up to him, she promised herself over and over again, for all the coldness of the world by her warmth of tenderness. She was a woman so deeply in love that nothing seemed impossible, not even the changing of the hearts about her.

The wedding took place in the little church, one hot August afternoon, with no one present except the two families. The blacksmith, who was the church janitor, had unlocked the door and opened the windows when the minister came. He lingered, busily sweeping the front steps, until the wedding party arrived. They all rode in the Swenson wagon, drawn by the wide-horned oxen whose great muscles moved smoothly under their gleaming coats as they took their patient way along the road.

Lena wore a soft gray dress made by herself. Larsen remembered hearing Burghardt say that the material took the last of the credit for the Jensens' ox. He supposed it was foolish of her to spend money that way, but he could not help noticing that Lena, as she stepped out of the wagon, draped in the delicate folds, looked hardly older

than her daughter. Her brilliance of color and her air of fullness of life had all the vividness of fire in a mist. Matts, in the ugly clothes of country convention, had masked for the moment the beauty and grace of his tall figure, but the fine lines of his face and the noble breadth of his eyes could not be disguised. To Lena, at least, as she stood watching him help his mother and sister from the wagon, he was Balder the Beautiful, the god of the Scandinavian lore of her childhood, born once more upon the earth.

Larsen stood on the steps and nodded to them as they entered the church. Then he walked back toward his little blackened shed where the fire of the forge was burning low. "There 's no fool like an old fool," he thought to himself as he remembered Lena's face, turned to Matts as if he and she were alone in the world.

Christina stood close to her mother during the service, and Matts, seeing her sweet face lifted to his, rejoiced that after to-day he would know all her comings and goings and be her protector from the worst hardships of life.

When Matts and Lena had been pronounced man and wife and the prayer of exhortation and blessing had been completed, they all stood around for a few moments, answering the minister's questions and talking in subdued tones to each other. As they finally went out of the church, the minister locked the door and put the key in his pocket. "The Lord is extending my parish these days," he said, cheerfully. "This is the second wedding this week. In Blackbird, day before yesterday, I married Karl Burghardt to a German girl he 's been courting these two years."

He had hardly finished the words when Olga, who had been staring at him with eyes of horror, cried out, "No, no, not two years! Oh, you have forgotten! He has loved me all this time!"

They turned to look at her, amazed. Matts tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him from her and faced the minister in hysterical frenzy. "No one must say that! He loved me always!" she kept crying out, as if defying him to contradict her.

The startled minister tried the consolations of his faith. "It is God's will, Olga. If he loved you once, he can love only his wife now. I think it is the hot sun," he added, turning to Brigitta, who looked as if the world had suddenly dipped under her. "Just take her home and put cold water on her head."

Matts had drawn the frantic girl a little apart, and was speaking to her sternly, as he would to a sleep-walking child, in an effort to get her attention.

"Olga," he said, "dear Olga, look at me. It is Matts. Be quiet so that you can hear what I say."

She still moaned, but she seemed to be trying to listen to him. He led her into the shade of the church, still farther away from the others.

"Oh, Matts, help me," she cried, her words broken by anguished breaths. "I thought I had forgotten him, but I was really only waiting for him to come back to me. I was sure he would come! What can I do?"

"You must forget him, Olga. He belongs to someone else now."

She wrung her hands. "That other woman can't have him," she cried, holding Matts from her. "You must go, Matts, and tell her she is a wicked woman. She could have plenty of lovers, but I am a cripple and he is the only man that ever loved me. Matts, you will go?" Her last words were a frenzied entreaty.

"Olga," he said quietly, holding her hands in a firm grasp, "will you wait until to-morrow? We 'll think to-night what we can do."

"Oh, but you are going to leave me," she groaned, "you

are going to your new home. I can't stay alone with father and mother. I 'll kill myself!"

"No, dear," he said, soothingly, "I 'll go home with you, and I 'll stay with you as long as you need me."

He watched the effect of his words upon her. She still wrung her hands and moaned, but she was beginning to get some control of herself.

"If you 'll stay with me, I can come," she said, hiding her poor, tortured face against him. He took her back to the anxious group in front of the church.

"She will be better now," he said. "They work the girls too hard in Red Falls, and this sun is as hot as the fire under Larsen's bellows."

He got Olga into the wagon and sat beside her with his arm about her. The minister watched them go, disturbed and uncertain what to do. Matts's calmness reassured him, but he wondered if the queerness everyone spoke of in Matts might not be a mad streak in the girl. Karl had probably never so much as looked at her, but, like other plain girls, she wanted a lover and imagined him in the first good-looking man she met. Karl, at any rate, was safely married now to the little German girl. The minister could not forget the good sausages and sauerkraut he had eaten at the wedding feast. He had very few German parishioners, but his was the only Lutheran church in the two towns in which he preached, and the Germans had to come to his services or miss church entirely. The Burghardts knew Swedish as well as they did German and were glad to belong to his congregation, especially as it was a help to business. Though the pastor knew that this was one of the reasons, it did not make their rich, tasty food any the less palatable. He hoped, as he saw the wagon start off, that a good night's sleep would show the girl how foolish she had been.

It was far from a gay wedding party that drove slowly

down the road toward the little Jensen cabin. Lena did not speak to Matts, but she talked cheerfully with the children and told Brigitta stories of weddings she had seen in her younger days, and gossip of her first home in America, until Brigitta began to look less disturbed and even talked a little herself. Under cover of their words Olga sat silent, holding Matts's hand as if to anchor herself in the dizzying whirl of emotions that tossed her to and fro like a helpless cork in stormy waters.

When the wagon stopped at the cabin, the children jumped out, followed by their mother, and then they all waited for Matts to follow. He sat beside Olga, without moving, but his eyes sought Lena's.

"I must stay with Olga," he said, as if in half appeal, "until she is better."

Olga saw the quick disappointment on Lena's face and tried to say a word of protest, but her hand did not relax its desperate clutch of Matts's. Lena smiled at Matts a little sadly, but she spoke cheerfully. "Of course," she said, "you must go. We shall be waiting and watching for you when you come."

Her eyes alone said the parting was hard for her, but the yearning of her look stayed with Matts long after she had disappeared from his sight.

He and Olga talked together until dark under a tree near the house. He poured out his sympathy in her gusts of grief, and steadied her in her despairing rage at life. His bridal night was spent in the familiar four walls of his boyhood home, listening to the restless tossing and muffled weeping of his unhappy sister. She dressed early and went out of the cabin. Matts followed her and found her in the half light, looking at the farm buildings, nestled to the ground like hiding fledglings, as if she had never seen them before.

"I feel as if I 'd had a terrible sickness, Matts, and was

better now," she said, as quietly as though speaking to someone else. "It 's because I have talked to you. My thoughts have been like a heavy, heavy load holding me down for many months, and now I can walk again. I shall miss my load," she tried to smile at him, "because now I 've nothing in all the world that is mine."

"Don't forget what I told you," he said, answering her ravaged look rather than her words. "You are going to be happy again and find many people to love."

"But there is only one I want," she began stormily. Then she stopped as though rebuking herself. "No — I will not think that again."

After a moment she went on: "I want to go back to Red Falls to-day, Matts. Can you take me? I 'm happier there. I can learn to forget, because I 've told you everything."

Matts thought with a pang of his own waiting family. The trip to Red Falls and back would take three days. But he consented at once, and Olga went into the house to tell her mother and to get ready for the start.

## CHAPTER XXII

The week after his return from Red Falls was never forgotten by Matts. Lena, in the tender intimacy of marriage, told him the pitiful story of her life, of the early years of experience that had marked her out from the women about her, and of the tragedy that had sent her to America, the helpless victim of a cruel husband. As he held her in his arms, his heart seared by her words, he promised himself to make up to her by all that faithful affection could do, for the bitterness of the past. Her own memory of anguish dimmed, once she had confided it to him, and she could live intensely in the joy of the present. But his first impulse was to wipe out the sickening thought of human suffering by a new absorption in his experiments. Ideas were clean and kind. He hung over his ripening wheat, finding serenity flowing back into him as he labeled the stalks and got ready to gather and store them in a safe place in the barn. He decided not to cut his wheat before it was fully ripe, as the farmers cut the grain for the general harvest, but to allow the seed to store up all the sunlight and the nourishment it could before he brought it in.

He and his father helped each other in their harvesting. As he and Nils went down the Swenson fields, scythe in hand, mowing great armfuls of the wheat which Oscar and Brigitta, following behind, tied with a twist of straw into bundles, his eye was sharp to notice whether the heads in his little plot were in danger of dropping the grains before he got them in. The short Swedish wheat was fully ripe, but the inner scales held the seeds firmly in their

sheath. The other row of ears was ripe as well, and Matts noticed here and there an emptied glume from which the seed had fallen. He dropped his mowing in a flash and cut the two rows, laying them tenderly on the ground so that no more of the precious seed should fall. Nils, as he stopped now and then to sharpen his scythe with the whetstone he carried in the pocket of his overalls, watched uneasily, but said nothing. Oscar was all interest, and helped him carry the bundle to the house, where Matts laid it on a bed for safe-keeping until he could take it home and free the grain from the straw. When he returned to pick up his scythe, he looked again at the later plantings next the cut-down rows. The wheat in them was already ripe, but would not be injured by a few days more on the stalk. He decided not to cut it until he had finished helping his father harvest.

The next morning, before he started back to his father's, with Lena's eager help he mowed and brought in the grain she had helped him cross not so many weeks before. They opened a head here and there, and Lena exclaimed at the size and color of the kernels.

"But that 's not the whole of it," said Matts, restraining his enthusiasm. "We have got to wait and see what these seeds do when we put them in the ground." He smiled as he added, "We are not raising them just to look pretty."

"But can't we enjoy their prettiness while we wait?" asked Lena, holding her handful up for him to admire. Matts looked at the warm pinkish kernels like a mother admiring her first-born.

"Wait until next year," he repeated, but his face shone as he spoke.

Every moment that could be spared from the heavy work of the harvesting time Matts spent shaking the grains from the straw, wrapping the different kinds in papers, and marking on the envelope all the details of their plant-

ing and their after care. Lena, who sat with him sometimes late into the night, though she might be drooping with weariness after a hard day, wondered that he remembered so many facts which seemed unimportant to her — the kind of soil, the place from which the seed was brought, the date of planting, the day the green shoots first appeared above the ground, the time the flowers came to their maturity, whether they were self-fertilized or crossed, and, if crossed, which were the male and which the female parents. Even the length of the straw and the size of the head, the time of full ripening and the day of cutting were recorded, with a little note to keep in memory the fact that some of the tall straws were dropping their grains when fully ripe, while the Swedish heads held theirs. But though Lena wondered, her yearning to protect the man who could plan such miracles and dream such dreams was only strengthened. Her love was increasingly satisfied to give, and in its humility insisted less and less on understanding.

Lena had need of all her own strength and of all the help the children could give her that fall, for Matts was gone six weeks with the threshing crew, and much of the labor of the harvesting, the digging of potatoes, the husking of the corn, and part of the threshing and the winnowing fell to their share. But there is no complete exhaustion to the woman whose heart is happy, and every night Lena slept the sleep that restores. She and the children counted the days till Matts should return. They worked unrestingly, looking forward to their reward in his surprise and joy at what they had been able to do.

School began before Matts came home. Every morning Christina and the three older boys went off with their dinner in a pail and did not come back until late in the afternoon. They did what chores they could before they went and after they came home, but the burden on

Lena was heavy. She grew thin under the strain, and a little of the delicacy of Christina's look began to show in her face, but still she did not spare herself. Each heavy task she did was just another offering of love on the altar of her devotion.

Lena's only sorrow was the baby, Axel, whose passion of temper seemed to get worse as he grew older. She thought, as she sat churning the butter one morning after a struggle with the furious child, of Matts's talks to her about the crossed grain. She wondered if the same strange power of selection that was in the kernel of the wheat, picking out some gifts from the parents and leaving others, which was to bring Matts's grain to the perfect seed, had put this afflicted child into her arms. She looked sadly at the boy, who was sleeping, exhausted by his own rage, and longed for Matts's strength and tenderness. But the butter came quickly, Axel woke from his sleep quiet and good, and her courage for patient waiting returned.

Matts came back to find time pressing if he was to get his fields ploughed before the snow fell and frost hardened the ground. He worked early and late, as long as the light allowed him to see the turning furrows under his feet.

About noon, one soft October day, a pair of fast horses, pulling a light spring wagon, drove into the yard. Two men in brown hunting coats, a liver-colored pointer lying at their feet, sat in the front seat, with game bags and shotguns piled in the back. Lena came out of the door of the house at the sound of wheels.

"Does Matts Swenson live here?" asked the man who was driving.

"Yes," answered Lena, pointing to the field where Matts was plowing with the ox. "He is over there. I will call him in."

"Don't bother," said the stranger. "I will go and speak to him myself." As he spoke, he handed the reins to his companion and jumped out of the wagon, nodding his thanks to Lena. His coat seemed to be all great pockets, and on his feet he wore high boots that came above his knees. He started rapidly across the freshly ploughed field, where the furrows lay before him like long black waves, rolling before they break. He tripped once as his foot caught in an unnoticed root in the turned-over earth, but he quickly recovered and walked more slowly and carefully the rest of the way. Matts had stopped his ox when he saw him coming, and waited quietly, his hands still resting on the plough. His unshaded eyes, lifted from the dark earth at his feet, were blinded for a moment as he tried to recognize the man moving through the flickering waves of light which played over the surface of the ground.

The stranger began to speak while he was still some distance away.

"Are you Matts Swenson?" he called, with a nod of greeting, and went on without waiting for an answer, "I 've just driven over from Blackbird to do some duck shooting in the lakes round here. They told me over there that this is a great duck country. Burghardt, down at the store," — he motioned with his head, — "says you know more about the best places to shoot than any man round here. I 'll give you two dollars a day if you 'll take me and my friend for three days' shooting."

He stood by the plough, one foot in the furrow and one on the stubble-tipped clod beside it, his eyes inquiringly fixed on Matts's bronzed face.

At his words, Matts's face broke into the richness of expression which was his chief charm. He smiled at the stranger as at an old friend.

"I think I can help you out," he said. "I have n't had

time to do any shooting this fall, but I know a lake where we can get all the ducks you could want and plenty for my own family too."

"You 're my man," said the other, with the hearty air the city dweller sometimes affects to set the farmer at his ease.

Matts smiled a little to himself, but he unfastened the ox, with the stranger's officious but inexpert help, and turned back to the house, leaving the plough standing in the furrow, its polished shank still supporting the rounded mould of fresh-cut earth.

Lena and the man in the wagon were talking together when they got back to the house. Matts led the ox into the barn. When he came out again he walked over to the spirited horses, impatient to be on their way, and said to Lena, who stood beside them, "These men want me to go hunting with them for a few days."

"Yes," answered Lena. "This gentleman, Mr. Hill, has just told me. I said you knew everything there was to be known about the wild game around here."

Matts laughed and said to the men, "You must n't believe everything a woman says about her husband. She 'll never learn that he 's just like other men."

The two agreed jocosely, though they wondered a little to hear a Swedish farmer and his wife talk about each other like young lovers. They seemed to recall something the gruff storekeeper had said about a second marriage. She certainly looked older than he did, but she was a pretty little woman and seemed to think a good deal of her husband. Perhaps they had not been married long enough to get tired of each other.

Matts had gone into the house and the barn and collected what he needed to take with him — a coat, a gun, an empty grain sack, his axe, and a heavy blanket.

"We 've got plenty of ammunition and food," called

the older, more jovial man, whom the other called Langdon. "We 'll supply you with all you need."

Matts, coming out of the barn, smiled his thanks.

"That 's good luck," he observed. "I could n't find a single cartridge."

He put his hand gently on Lena's shoulder.

"I 've told Axel he must be a good boy till I come back." He held the child's hand firmly as he spoke. The little fellow glanced up at him uncertainly, but he kept a tight grip of one of the long fingers when Matts started to leave.

Lena's smile followed them down the road and lingered on her lips while she fed the animals, gave Axel his mush and milk, and finished baking the bread which was already in the oven. When the child had fallen asleep, she went to the barn and led out the ox. She lifted his heavy yoke to his shoulders and fastened him to the harrow made of brush. She knew any day the frost might come and find the fields unready. The plough she could not hold firmly enough to use, but all the afternoon, back and forth over the freshly turned earth she drove the ox, breaking up the clods, crumbling the loam over the torn stubble, and leaving the surface ready for the moisture, the freezing, the rotting, and the mellowing of the long winter's preparation for the fertile spring. When the children reached home, she had put the ox back in the barn and was waiting for them in the house. She told them the exciting tale of the coming of the strangers and of Matts's departure with them, but she said never a word of the finished field or of her back whose aching seemed to have no end.

## CHAPTER XXIII

Matts sat in the back seat of the wagon, watching the horses trot rapidly along the dry road, with its fringe of weeds and late flowers waiting the first touch of frost to shrivel and perish. He loved the feeling of the currents of air made by the speed with which they moved, blowing through his hair and across his face. After driving oxen, the dash and spirit of the horses seemed almost miraculous. The sweat of their going darkened their shining russet sides, but they showed no signs of slackening their pace.

The questions of the men fell on Matts's ears, as unceasing as the beat of the horses' feet. They wanted to know about the settlers, the soil, the crops, how much interest the farmers paid on their mortgages, how they marketed their grain and what prices they got for it, how many months the school was in session, and whether there was any talk of a branch railroad line coming into their section. Matts answered with an intelligence which made the men look at each other now and then in astonishment they were tactful enough to conceal from him.

When they left the farms and followed rough, little-used roads deep into the woods, they began to question him about the wild life of the country. His familiarity with the ways of the birds and beasts showed that he had lived with them intimately and loved them.

"Your wife was about right," laughed Hill, after Matts had told them of the way of a wild mother duck with her tiny ducklings, which he had watched as a boy all through

the day on the very lake to which he was taking them. "It is n't every boy who would spend a day looking at a duck swimming round with her brood, when he had a gun in his hand and knew how to shoot."

Matts laughed. "They all think I am stupid round here," he said, "but I like to see what the creatures do better than I like to eat them."

The road was disappearing under the horses' feet. They had passed the beginnings of a log cabin which had been long since abandoned, and the dim track they were following had evidently been used only a short time for dragging logs. The underbrush was thin, and they could easily find a way for the wagon even without a road. The trees were large and far enough apart to give the park-like look not uncommon on the borders of the little Minnesota lakes. They drove for a quarter of a mile through the quiet woods, finding a clear way by winding a little here and there, so that they did not have to use the axe which Matts had slipped under the back seat when they started. The warm sun sifted through the thinning leaves overhead and the occasional call of a blue jay broke the shimmering silence. They could see a bit of the lake through the trees, and Matts suggested that they stop here, fasten the horses, and go the rest of the way on foot. The men agreed. They quickly unharnessed the animals and tied them by their halters to tall trees, under which there was a little dried grass they could eat.

"They 're pretty hot from such fast going," said Matts, with a handful of grass wiping off their wet, lathered necks where the collars had rubbed. "I 'll water them when they are cooler and give them some of the oats I see you have in the wagon."

The men were getting out their guns and fitting cartridges into their belts as he spoke. Hill passed him a

handful of the ammunition. Langdon called sharply to the dog, which was dashing round the woods in great excitement. The pointer's nose ran along the ground as though fastened to it, and his mottled flexible tail, with its close short hair, swung behind him like a rudder as he darted here and there. The dog came at his master's call and crouched on his haunches, looking up imploringly. His tail wagged unrestingly, and his leg muscles were taut, ready at the first tiny signal of consent to dash off again into the world of exciting smells and wild adventure.

The lake was one of those sedgy, glacial hollows, gradually filling in with vegetation and destined, some day, to be transformed into fertile meadows, so common in Minnesota. The edges were irregularly rimmed with reed-like water grass, the Indian rice, eagerly sought by migrating birds. A point of land jutted out at their right, well into the lake, fringed also on its shallow margin with the heavily headed grass.

The three men walked out to the end of the point, pushing their way through low bushes or wading along the marshy border. The dog was quivering with excitement. He suddenly pointed out into the lake at their left, and stood rigid, waiting. The sound of whirring wings broke upon their ears and they caught a glimpse of half a dozen feeding ducks beating their startled way out from the midst of the rice and flying low over the water toward the centre of the lake. Hill had fired at the first sound, and one of the ducks dropped at the edge of the reeds and struggled falteringly back into their sheltering midst. The dog jumped into the water at the word of command and swam out, breaking his way through the impeding growth and lifting himself now and then above the grasses he was bending down in his path, to catch sight of the wounded bird. The duck was not quite dead when he reached it, but he caught it after one

or two efforts and swam back to the shore. He came out of the water, dripping but elated, holding the bird lightly in his mouth. The wings of the duck hung limp and muddied, but the metallic green of its drooping head gleamed brilliantly in the sun. The dog laid the body at his master's feet and stood there, alternately shaking himself to get rid of the water and wriggling with joy at his master's praise.

"Don't forget, the first bird is to my credit," said Hill, emphatically. "A good beginning is everything."

"There will be so many before you are through," observed Matts, "that you will forget who got the first. The string of lakes running north from here is the migrating path of hundreds of thousands of ducks, spring and fall. From this point, one afternoon in October five years ago, I counted a thousand passing in an hour."

Their stir in coming through the bushes had frightened away all the ducks near the point, though there were plenty in other parts of the lake. The two men took the dog and started off along the shore, looking for better chances to shoot, while Matts went back to the wagon to get his axe. He planned to make a blind of brush at the very tip of the point, from which shelter the men could shoot at dusk and in the early morning, when the birds in great flocks were on the wing.

When the blind at the point was finished, he made another near a shallow bend where the Indian rice grew far out into the water. Then he sat waiting for the return of the men, hearing far off the strange call of the loon, like the crying of a lost and desolate child. His heart warmed at the thought of five young children safe from tragedy in the shelter of his protecting love. They must be coming home from school now. He knew they would be hurrying to find him and tell him the happenings of the day. He was never too busy to hear it all,

from the spelling mistake of the youngest Johnson to the sum only Oscar, of all his class, could do. And dear Christina, growing so fast into young womanhood, would she remember to bring home to-day the book the teacher was loaning her to read to him?

That night the men slept against the wall of the abandoned cabin, a rough shelter of branches arranged over their heads. They rolled in blankets and lay close to each other for warmth. Matts had built a big fire in front of the cabin, and in its glow they went to sleep; but as the embers paled during the night, they shivered and half-woke, wondering what had happened to turn an October midnight into winter.

At the first glimmerings of light, Matts built up the fire and woke the men. He made coffee over the glowing coals, in a pot blackened by many camp fires, and fried bacon and eggs in a big iron pan. The two hunters ate heartily in the crisp coldness of the early morning. They limbered their muscles, stiffened by the unaccustomed sleeping on the ground, by walking round the fire or basking in its blaze. Matts was as vigorous and rested as though he had spent the night on feathers. He had fed the horses their oats and freed them, with a small log of wood tied to the end of each halter rope, to crop the grass that grew here and there in the tiny clearing round the rotting cabin wall.

The dog was walking about, after ravenously eating what was given to him, eager to be off. The men inspected the bag of game from the previous evening's shooting, — set in the wagon for safe keeping, — refilled their cartridge belts, and stuffed enough bread and cheese into their pockets to feed themselves through the day.

When they reached the blinds on the point, the sky was rapidly losing its blue, though the sun had not yet

risen. The whole lake was full of the sound of the birds, flying in from the north and dropping down, in tens and twenties, at the marshy edges where the rice was thickest. They would feed for a time, then fly up and on a little farther, the tall grass bending and parting from the drive of their outspread wings. Now and then, as if at a signal, a great flock would rise high in the air and fly rapidly toward the south. One bird would lead and the others follow, at an unchanging rate, their bodies heavy with the morning's feeding but borne steadily along by the strong wings.

The two men sat in the blind and shot for hours. The dog brought in the ducks so fast that, in the short intervals between the passing of one flock and the coming of another, he lay panting with fatigue. Matts crouched in the other blind, but he shot only such birds as he could bring to shore himself by wading into the water. After a time his bag was full and he put his gun down, watching with a never-sated interest the beautiful creatures swimming back and forth, their webbed feet opening and closing as they pushed ahead, or trailing behind them as they glided through the water. They fed rapidly, lifting their broad bills to the bending rice. When they flew off again, they raised their clumsy bodies into the air with a few quick strokes of their wings, brushing the tufted heads of the grasses with their feathered breasts as they passed. He could distinguish the mallard, the canvasback, and the teal, with an occasional bird not so familiar to him. Once he saw a long V of geese pass far overhead, flying fast, seeming to disdain the little lake with its busy, unmindful feeders and its lurking death.

Matts picked some of the rice and pulled the heads to pieces, studying the seed and its enclosing scales. He chewed a few of the kernels, enjoying their nutty flavor, and thought what a new and wonderful grain he could

produce if he were only able to cross this sturdy plant of the northern wilds with the richer grass from the Syrian mountains.

The two men, coming from their blinds to eat lunch away from the glare of the water, found Matts sitting in the shade of a big oak, looking with dreamy eyes at the spear of rice he held in his hand.

"That 's a wonderful food, that wild rice," said Hill, as the men put down their guns, pulled off their heavy coats, and threw themselves on the ground near Matts. "I 've often wondered why someone does n't try to raise it. The first man who raised wheat must have begun with a grass like that."

Matts's eyes shone. He sat up suddenly.

"Do you know about wheat?" he asked, breathlessly, "what it was in the beginning?"

"Only from what I have read in books," answered Hill, a little surprised at the question. "Do you know something about it?" he asked, indifferently.

"If you know anything about it, tell me," cried Matts, his whole face alight with eagerness. "I think nothing but wheat from morning till night!" Then, in a flood, he poured out his dreams and hopes, and told the story of the crude beginnings of his effort to create the perfect seed. Langdon listened for a while, thinking such doings a pretty poor way for a farmer to spend his time, but he soon ceased to pay attention and, instead, drowsed through the warm midday, lying on the dry grass with his hat pulled over his face.

Hill listened, and questioned, and, when Matts had finished, talked long himself, spurred on by an absorption in his every word not given to many speakers. He had read much in an amateur way about biology and the new doctrine of evolution, and, as he talked through the long afternoon, he brought to the tawny-haired young

farmer, sitting at the edge of the shimmering lake, ideas and concepts which had been gathered from the ends of the earth by the naturalist in the ship Beagle, and, after a lifetime of study, launched upon a reluctant world. Hill had himself thought superficially about the theory of evolution, and had often, with a pleasant sense of intellectual exercise, contrasted its revolutionary doctrines with the rigid ideas in which he had been trained as a boy. But to this fair-haired Swede, who had never read more than a half dozen books in all his life, and who had toiled unrestingly from childhood at the endless labor of planting and harvesting, they were not matters for an afternoon's argument, but the very water of life.

As they talked together, to Matts far more than to Hill, with his wider knowledge, was the sense of a moving and changing world a living reality. All that the older man could tell of the discoveries and prophecies of the scientists, he could see realized in the forms of life he himself had observed minutely all these years.

After a time his questions probed deeper than Hill's knowledge of the subject could go, and the two fell silent, Matts wondering at the new world of thought opened to him and Hill wondering at him. After one of Matts's questions which he was unable to answer, Hill said, "I tell you what I 'll do. When I get back to the city, I 'll send you a copy of Darwin's book. Then you 'll know the whole story."

Matts's look of gratitude haunted him the rest of that day. He imagined that so Greely's starving men must have looked when the relief ship brought food to them in their tattered canvas shelter in the far North.

He did not forget either the look or the talk. A week after the hunters had parted from Matts with thanks and promises to hunt in the New Sweden region another year, Oscar brought home from the post office a package

addressed to Matts Swenson, with the name of a bookstore in St. Paul printed on one corner of the label. He ran out to the back of the barn, where Matts sat in the midst of dried stalks and leaves, husking a great pile of corn. Oscar appeared, waving the package in his hand and shouting, in great excitement, "Something from the city for you, Matts!"

Matts dropped the ear of corn he was husking, and held the package in his hand for a moment, wondering what it could be. He opened it carefully, saving the paper, for he needed wrappers for his wheat seed. He read the title aloud: "*The Origin of Species,* by Charles Darwin." On the flyleaf was written, "Matts Swenson, from his friend, Franklin Hill, with best wishes for the success of the experiments."

Matts opened the book, and sat without moving until the sun had disappeared. The boys milked the cow and did the evening chores, and still he had not stirred. When it was too dark to read, he got up and went into the house, walking as though half dazed. He showed the book to Lena and then crouched in a chair by the lamp, unconscious of anyone in the room. He hardly touched the food which Lena set before him. The children watched him, disappointed that he did not ask them about their day at school, or talk to them, but Lena would not let them say a word. She sent them to bed early and soon went herself, lying wakeful, waiting for Matts to follow her.

She looked at his bent head in the light of the lamp, her heart warm with the pride in him that dwelt there supreme. She wondered what his thoughts were now, and what new and wonderful plans he would have after reading this book. She finally closed her eyes, carrying with her into sleep the picture of his absorbed face, lifted a moment as his big brown hand turned a page, and then

bent again over the book, mindful of nothing except the unfaltering flow of words which revealed to him the structure of an idea powerful enough to remould the thinking of a world.

## CHAPTER XXIV

Evening after evening during the winter months Matts sorted his seeds, selecting and rejecting. Hundreds which he set aside as second best he decided to sow in the field with the ordinary wheat seed, so that he might have another chance to pick out from the mature grain some qualities worth saving, which he had failed to detect in the seed itself. His reading and rereading of Darwin's book made him increasingly conscious of the multitude of diverse forces at work both to aid and to defeat him. He could recognize and foresee only a few of them. The others must be left to reveal themselves in successive generations of the wheat. He was fearful that some of the seed which he was tempted to cast aside might have the very capacity for variation and adaptation for which he was searching. He must not risk failure by depending too entirely upon his own judgment, but must safeguard the wheat against possible errors on his part. Nevertheless, it was with high hopes in the spring that he made his final choices, planted his little plot, and fenced it more securely than ever before against wandering chickens or stray cattle.

He had cleared no new land during the year, but he and Oscar had burned and uprooted stumps so that the fields were in fair condition. The corner in which the special wheat was planted had been gone over by hand, and the soil was soft and finely divided, fit for the task it was asked to do. Each day it was visited by different members of the family. And that morning on

which Jens appeared with word that he had seen a tiny green shoot in the black earth was a gala day for them all.

The weather seemed favorable for good crops, though the previous summer had been almost without rain. During the whole season promising clouds had formed and then dissolved, and the only thing that had not changed was the blazing heat of the sun. For the farmer of the upper Mississippi Valley, dry summers carried a threat of danger from the locust, whose breeding grounds were on the unbroken prairies at the base of the Rocky Mountains. The plague of grasshoppers had brought disaster a few years before, and had only been halted by a series of wet summers, in which the parasite of the grasshopper had flourished and destroyed his host. But throughout the Northwest three dry summers had followed, and, to those who could read signs, there was cause for anxious watching.

One morning in July, Lena was carrying some scraps from the house to the pigpen by the barn. She thought she noticed a little change in the light about her, as if a thin cloud had crossed the sun, and looked up to make sure. She stopped abruptly, appalled at what she saw. Clearly visible against the brilliant background of the sun, millions of tiny winged creatures, like a dark mist, were flying across the sky from the northwest. She called to Matts in sudden terror. He had been hoeing in the field and was just coming back to the barn. They both stared at the strange sight, knowing only too well that it meant misfortune for them.

"My wheat!" groaned Matts. "They will destroy my wheat!"

Lena seized his arm.

"We can cover it with sheets and save it that way," she cried.

Matts looked at her with gratitude for her quick wit that there was no time to express.

"Bring the sheets," he shouted, running toward the barn. "I will get the other things we need."

Calling the children to his help, Matts gathered together a spade and a hoe and a heap of small logs of wood. They all carried what they could and ran to the field where the wheat stood, tender and green in the warm sunlight and full of rich juices to tempt the flying horde above it. By the time they reached the little enclosure, the grasshoppers had begun to drop. Great clouds of them, still on the wing, were moving to the east high over their heads, but increasing numbers at their feet had begun to climb up the wheat and settle on the stalks and leaves.

Lena hurried out, her arms full of sheets from her wedding chest, worn thin by many washings but still strong enough to keep out insects. Matts dug a trench around as much of the plot as the linen could cover. The rest of the treasured wheat must take its chance with the fields about it. Then one edge of the sheets was laid in the trenches, held down by logs that were, in turn, covered with the dirt which had been tossed aside. The other end was drawn over the fence which enclosed the wheat and sewed together at the top, so that no insect could crawl in between the folds. Before the green stalks were finally hidden from sight, every grasshopper that could be found in the enclosure was destroyed. When the last sheet was sewed in place, they all stood looking at the square white tent where a short time before the wheat had been growing vigorous and safe.

Matts's face was haggard with distress.

"I do not know which is worse for the wheat, shading it from the sun this way or letting it take its chance with the grasshoppers." Then he added, as the winged insects began to fall about them like a dark hailstorm, "We can

tell pretty soon. If any of the wheat lives we shall be lucky."

Christina was ready to weep at the sight of the dingy brown grasshoppers which seemed to come from every direction, crawling about and feeding in the fields planted with such labor by Matts and the boys. The baby was hiding his face in his mother's dress to protect himself against the flying creatures that dashed indifferently against him or against the stalks of grain, as they came hurrying down to the ground. Lena herself was pale with dread, but she went back into the house with the younger children and closed the door to keep out the insects which had already begun to appear in numbers in the little cabin.

All through that day the invasion continued. At first Matts stayed by the wheat plot, unable to tear himself away. The children, watching him, felt as if they were facing a tragedy from which no power could save them. They looked to Matts as if he in his wisdom must know a way to destroy the dreadful pest, but he seemed as despairing as they. The terrifying helplessness that overwhelms men in the face of such disasters as earthquakes or floods or cyclones, whose coming and going are beyond control, held the whole family in its grip.

Soon, however, Matts pulled himself together and, with the children's help, set to work to do what he could. All day they shoveled the insects into bags and burned them on a heap of brush. The heavy smoke drifted low from the fire, carrying with it a suffocating, acrid smell, but the number of grasshoppers seemed not to be thereby lessened.

When evening came and Matts saw that the protection over the wheat was successful in holding the grasshoppers out, and that in the fields the insects seemed to prefer the oats and barley, his spirits rose. The maturing of the

precious grain would certainly be delayed by the covering sheets, but some sunlight would sift through the white cloth, and when the grasshoppers had eaten all there was to eat they would surely depart and let him open his planting once more to the direct rays of the sun. Matts blessed his good fortune that the plague had not come the year before, when he was cross-pollinating. Then it would indeed have destroyed his work, but this year he was planning to let all the wheat be self-fertilized, and see what variations had already begun to fix themselves in the seed. Such pollinating could take place under the shelter of the sheets as well as in the open air.

At supper he was cheerful once more.

"As long as the grasshoppers don't eat the children, Lena," he said, "we ought not to fret. I feel safe about my wheat, so I 've stopped worrying."

Lena tried to smile, but she thought of the five children round the table and of the amount of bread they ate in a year, and her heart sank. She concealed her fears as well as she could. Matts was like another beloved child, and she must not let her anxiety darken his days.

Nothing the farmers of the neighborhood did seemed to reduce the number of grasshoppers. Poison which had been used successfully against other pests was ignored by the swarming hordes, and the most valuable crops were their chosen food. Occasionally a great cloud of them would fly away, and the anxious victims of their devastating hunger would begin to breathe again. But in a few hours, as if in answer to some mysterious signal, out of the west would come another wave of the winged creatures, from some source apparently ever renewed and inexhaustible. The ground became covered with the small, elongated pellets which they dropped. The heads of grain withered and drooped as the leaves and stems were destroyed, and what had a week before been a green

and fertile world prematurely faded to a desolate brown.

The sharp rasp of a grasshopper's wings rubbing against its wing covers, multiplied thousands of times, sounded through the night like an omen of threatening destruction. Lena imagined she could hear the sound of their eating, all day and all night, as leaves and stems were crunched and torn by multitudes of unresting jaws.

Then, one morning, there was a stir and rustle everywhere in the vegetation, and up from the grass and the fields, leaving a leaf half eaten or a stalk untouched, the grasshoppers began to rise in hundreds of thousands, and to fly eastward on a light wind that had sprung up at dawn. The thin stream of tiny dark dots thickened and broadened until it stretched away to the east like a ribbon, endlessly unrolling. At every farm for miles around, men, women, and children gathered to watch the strange sight, shielding their eyes from the sun as the grasshoppers, flying higher, crossed its face. Over their heads from farther west the migration continued. All day the stream passed, and as long as there was light they could see stragglers flying fast, as if they knew they were late.

Matts and Lena went at dawn to the shrouded wheat plot. As they passed through the fields, they saw only sickly or dying grasshoppers. The rest had disappeared, though the destruction they had wrought remained. Matts laid back the draped sheets with a trembling hand, and looked breathlessly at his wheat. It had suffered from the lack of sun and was yellowed, but he hastily opened a few flowers and found that they had safely matured. The anthers had broken and scattered the pollen on the stigma, and fertilization had not been halted. He folded back the sheets over the enclosing fence so they might keep out any stray insects that crawled near the fresh, untouched

grain. Then with his scissors he reduced the number of spikelets on each head as he had done the year before when he cross-fertilized. More than ever now, he was sure, did the seeds which were to survive need all the nourishment the sun-deprived stalks could carry to them. Lena helped, as thankful as he that the cherished wheat had not suffered, but unable to keep her eyes from the destroyed fields about her, where the few spared heads stood here and there like lone sentinels in the midst of the ruin.

New Sweden, when it had time to sit down and count its losses, found that it had not suffered so badly as the country to the south, and would still be able to gather enough food from its wasted fields to keep from starving. But careless habits acquired in the lavish years would have to be promptly unlearned, for every spear of grass and blade of wheat had become precious, and the gleanings were the very substance of the crop. The more prosperous farmers, who had before this always stayed at home during the winter, were forced in the fall to go north to the lumber camps to work. Money was needed to buy hay, which had to be brought in on trains from more fortunate regions and carried in great wagons long miles from the railroad. Without such extra fodder the cattle could not be kept alive till spring. Many a woman with young children had to be left by her husband to do a man's work in addition to her own, that first hard winter after the grasshopper plague.

Matts had to go with the rest, but he did not leave until he had carefully sorted and labeled his gathered seed. Very little of the wheat which had been unprotected came to maturity, but his covered plot yielded such a variety that he was bewildered as to the next step to take. The straw in most of the stalks was of medium height, not so short as the Swedish nor so long as the native, but it carried heads of wide diversity, long, short, and inter-

mediate. Some of the heads were heavily bearded, some lightly, and some carried only two or three awns at the top. About a third of the wheat ripened early, and most of the rest late, but there was one heavy head of the last planting which, in spite of the set-back of the covering, ripened before any of the others. The seed from that single stalk was put in the place of greatest safety. Matts felt about it as a doting mother might feel about a precocious child, and lived in the thought of its future. Its only imperfection was that it shattered readily, letting out the grain; but Matts had found another head ripening only a few days later, with short, broad glumes that held the seeds more closely, and he made up his mind that he would cross the seeds of those two heads. There was another short, heavy spike, a little over three inches long, beardless, with full, glutinous kernels which ripened later than the others. This he must try to plant so that it could also be crossed with seed of the other two.

Matts carried with him to the lumber camp, on a big sheet of paper which he had begged from Burghardt's wrapping shelf, the numbers and descriptions of the different heads. Each entry was a tiny volume of the past, full of mysterious promise for the future. Through long evenings in the bunk house he sat looking at the chart, studying over the symbols, intelligible to no one except himself. Through the day, as his keen axe cut deeper and deeper into the great trees, he pondered over the cross-pollinations he would try on some heads, and the self-fertilizations he would permit on others.

The men poked fun at him at first, but his good-humored indifference to their jibes made them lose interest in trying to annoy him and they soon left him alone. When any newcomer came to the camp, they explained their strange neglect of such a heaven-sent opportunity to amuse themselves at the expense of another,

by pointing to their heads as they looked significantly at the bent figure of Matts, seated at the table with his wrinkled chart and its series of tiny entries spread out before him.

## CHAPTER XXV

LENA had concealed from Matts the worst menace of the winter to come. He had but a vague idea how much cornmeal and potatoes five children ate, and when he went away there was safely stored in the root cellar and the barn what seemed to him a good deal of both. Burghardt had promised to advance credit for the money which Matts would bring back in the spring, and he left feeling secure about the family in the little cabin.

But Lena, who had priced flour and potatoes at the store, knew that all the money he could earn through the winter, at the starvation prices, would not feed them, even if she herself should eat nothing. Neither would nursing neighbors, impoverished like themselves, bring in much toward helping keep them alive until Matts's return. She could not forget that grain for the cow must be bought, too, if they were to have milk. Her one comfort lay in the thought of the beans and pork, the bread and prunes, which would be plentifully supplied to the lumbermen at their hard work in the cold woods to the north.

The morning after Matts's departure, she put up a lunch and told the boys to collect all the digging tools they could find, spade, hoe, and mattock, and she herself brought heavy knives from her kitchen shelf. The corn bread and cottage cheese for their eating she put in a big basket Matts had made of willow withes, and handed it to Oscar to carry. Then she led the children through the woods back of the cabin and taught them to pick out from

the withered undergrowth, left untouched by the grasshoppers, or from the fresh green sprung up since their departure, the clustered leaves of the ginseng with the spike of deep red berries erect at their centre. She showed them, when they found the low plant, how to dig down into the ground and pull the root up, taking care neither to break it off nor to mar its strangely human shape. The children listened intently while she told them of an old man, Francis Travette, their neighbor when Christina and Oscar were babies, who spent much of his time collecting these roots and selling them at the country store.

"They ship the ginseng across the ocean to the Chinese, for medicine," said Lena, as she shook the dirt from a root which bore a quaint resemblance to a headless doll. "Mr. Travette told me they use it to cure tired minds and bodies, but he said he should think rest was better. If we can get money for collecting it, we don't mind what they do with it, do we, children?"

"Do you think anybody will give you money for these?" asked Oscar, doubtfully.

"Yes," answered Lena. "I saw a bag of roots in Burghardt's storeroom two days ago, and then I remembered about Mr. Travette. I asked Burghardt if he would buy roots from me. He looked surprised that I knew about ginseng, but he said he would take all I could bring. I made him promise me a good price, too, because I know how much they are really worth. I know more than he does. All he has heard is that the dealers in St. Paul will buy all he can send."

The children quickly scattered and began eagerly to search in the midst of thick, surrounding foliage. They shouted with delight when they recognized the leaves, borne three in a circle. Even Axel soon learned to know the scant cluster of berries and kept calling in excitement to the others to come and dig up the root. They wandered

back and forth through the woods, their eyes keen to detect the plants. Though they had stepped on them or passed them a score of times before, they had never really seen them until to-day.

When the early evening of October fell, they had a bag full of the brown, two-forked, irregular knobs. They walked home, tired but jubilant. Their mother's anxiety, hidden from Matts but clear to Christina and Oscar, had shadowed their days and made their childish helplessness a source of unhappiness. Now they could work until school opened. That would be very late this year, because the stricken community could not afford to tax itself for many weeks of a teacher's pay. When the frost made the ground too hard for digging, they would have to stop, but by then they would have collected enough to keep the cow from going hungry and the bread box from getting empty.

All day and every day, until the first long freeze in November made the ground ring to their tools like rock, the children and their mother gathered ginseng. Near the end of the time they had to hunt in woods far from home and to walk weary miles back and forth each day, but the pile of bags, stuffed full of roots, had mounted high, and Lena felt safe for the winter at last. She no longer dipped flour from the barrel with a sinking heart, counting the days until she should be scraping the bottom. She could even see the cow lick the last bit of bran mash from the pail and nose round for more, without fear for the future.

During the winter Christina grew rapidly, until she was taller than her mother, but she seemed frail and languid, and drooped as though she had lost all incentive for life. Lena, remembering other girls of sixteen, wasting away in little farmhouses in Sweden until their fairness became a deathlike, waxen pallor, watched her with a

haunting dread. There were moments when she caught her breath as though from a sudden blow, when she saw the slender girl rouse from her listlessness to answer some demand from one of the children and then sink back in her seat with an air of exhaustion. She protected her as much as she could from the demands of their hard life, and kept her at home from school during the worst part of the cold weather. Lena often found her, when her work was done, turning over the pages of Matts's farm papers. She was glad of that, for she knew how highly Matts valued education, and she felt sure he would rejoice that, since Christina was not well enough to go to school, she was at least learning to read more readily. But though Christina turned the pages often, she did not read; and though she drooped, neither the cough nor the fever of the white plague gave unmistakable sign of its presence.

Early in March Matts came back, full of the vigor of his winter of outdoor life and of joy at his return home. The rapture with which he was greeted would have satisfied a much more exacting nature than his. The boys jumped with joy and could hardly be persuaded to leave him for a moment. Lena's face was young and pretty as she threw her arms round his neck and clung to him like a girl. Christina first cried with joy and then, when he held her off from him and exclaimed with astonishment at the change the few months had wrought, she blushed and smiled and looked away.

"But where is little Christina?" Matts asked, half mournfully. "I did not know I was going to have a grown-up daughter. I want the little girl back again."

He followed her with his eyes as if he were trying to find the lost child in the beautiful young woman who stood before him, with the color coming and going on her face.

"I 'll have to learn to know you all over again," he said, still watching her intently. "I only hope you will be as nice as the little girl I used to know."

They all laughed at that, but, as they talked about the winter's experiences, Matts kept turning to look at Christina as if baffled by some mysterious, new quality in her he could not understand.

After a time the boys led him out to the barn to show him how the calf had grown, and what good care they had taken of the cow. When he came in again, his face was shining. He went up to Lena and put his arms around her.

"The boys have told me about the ginseng. You are a wonderful woman, Lena! Is n't she, children?"

Lena smiled and touched his cheek tenderly.

The busy weeks of the spring ploughing and planting used all the energy of every member of the family. Lena had dreaded the time for Christina, fearing that the girl's body would not be equal to the demands of her generous and spending spirit, but, to her surprise, Christina began to gain weight and her cheeks filled out and took on color again. Lena encouraged her to work out in the fields with Matts and the boys instead of in the house, and every day her appetite was better and her languor less.

In the evenings Matts and the girl would bend over the wheat chart, and she would listen to his plans for the planting and crossing of the seeds. She could not understand all the intricacies of his selections nor his reasons for crossing one type with another, but his happiness in telling and hers in hearing seemed equally great. Lena watched them, as she sat mending the shabby clothes of the family, rejoicing in Christina's growing beauty and in Matts's beloved presence in their midst once more. Now and then she had moments of uneasiness. This Christina, lifting her glowing face to Matts, was a new being, strange to her mother. Why did not the girl make friends among the

young people of New Sweden? Was she, like the rest of the family, becoming so absorbed in Matts that she cared for no one else? Was it best for her? Lena's heart was sometimes troubled and her face clouded with anxiety as she bent over her sewing. But when Matts turned to her with a smiling word, she brushed away her fears and smiled back at him with the old sense of security. The boys, drowsy after the long day's work, usually went early to bed, but the other three stayed on, talking and reading, happy in their mutual affection, until Lena, unable to stay awake any longer, would send Christina to bed and then follow her. Matts's young vigor seemed to know no need of rest, but in time he too would put away his papers and blow out the lamp. In a moment the quiet night would close in on the little cabin, sheltering it from the outer world until day should come back and light the dark corners once more.

Matts built the fence round his wheat patch more close-woven than usual, so that, if the grasshoppers came again, he could guard the grain even more completely than the year before. The farmers scanned the western sky anxiously every morning through June and July, but the enemy did not appear. Some strange blight, like those mysterious diseases of man which from the dawn of history have taken their turn at depopulating whole continents, had laid its deadly spell on the grasshoppers at their breeding grounds near the western mountains.

During the time of the maturing of the wheat, Lena was called away to nurse the old grandmother of the Johnsons, who seemed at last to be dying and was as helpless as a baby. Christina had to take her mother's place in caring for the house, and in helping Matts at his work of crossing. It was with a pang that Lena gave up to another the happy experience of sharing Matts's deepest interest. Their love for each other and Matts's love for his wheat were

so intertwined in her heart that she felt almost as if she were giving up a renewal of their betrothal by leaving him now. But the family needed all the money which outside work could bring them, and, though she cast many a backward look from her seat in Johnson's new spring buggy at the little cabin set against its dark background of trees, she went with a smile.

For two weeks she nursed the sick woman and helped Mrs. Johnson. Then, one morning early, the old grandmother, with a few slow breaths and a last reluctant sigh, gave up her hold on life and slipped into the unknown. Lena did the few things that had to be done to the little, shriveled body, worn like an overused machine which has been left out in all weathers, and went back to her home. She had no desire to stay and share with the Johnsons the excitement and importance of a death in the family.

Matts and the children were all overjoyed to welcome her back, but Christina seemed specially to cling to her, as if the need of her were very great.

"Dear, dear mother," she kept saying over and over again. It recalled to Lena the sad days in the past when the sensitive, shrinking child had tried to make up for Jensen's cruelty by the warmth of her own love.

Matts was full of happiness over his wheat and insisted upon Lena's coming immediately to see it. He and Christina, hand in hand, led the way to the field. Lena followed, a little tired from her two weeks of nursing day and night, and a little sad that she had not been able to share the work of cross-pollinating with Matts as she had done so many times before. But the happiness of being at home once more filled her heart, and when she saw the wheat, her joy and admiration were as great as even Matts's enthusiasm could ask.

"Christina is a second Lena when it comes to helping," Matts said, smiling at the girl, whose hand he still held.

She flushed painfully and drew her hand away, on the pretext of tying a covered spike more securely to its stake. "She has your delicate touch, and she is willing to stand all day in the hot sun." He looked at Christina's averted face, puzzled by her strange lack of response. Then he went on to tell Lena in detail what he had done to the different rows.

"These two," he said, pointing at the last he had planted, "we shall cross to-morrow morning. Then in a few days we can uncover them all and let the sun pour on them till they ripen."

Lena inspected the white-topped heads with a heart full of pride. One of the Johnson boys had said something slighting about Matts — hardly more than a word, but enough to make her sure that they did not think much of him as a farmer. What did they know? He was so much more wonderful than any farmer they had ever seen that they could not judge him! Her love reached out to protect him from everything, the work that enslaves and the unkind thought that kills. She looked at his fine head bent over the wheat, the fair skin, burned by the sun, showing brown through his yellow hair, and felt that perfect happiness in life had overtaken her. What mattered all the tragic years if they had brought her at last to this?

They walked back to the house, side by side, her heart at rest and her mind full of happy plans for the future.

## CHAPTER XXVI

The next morning, when Matts was ready to start for the field, Lena was in the midst of moulding her bread. She was secretly planning to have at the midday meal, as a surprise to them all, a new kind of roll Mrs. Johnson had taught her how to make, and, instead of going herself as she had expected to do, she sent Christina to help Matts with his wheat. Christina lingered a little.

"I wish you could come, mother," she said, hesitatingly. "I know I can't do it as well as you can."

Lena laughed as she kneaded a loaf with quick firm thrusts of her strong hands.

"You can do it this time," she said. "Matts loves that wheat too much to let you help him unless you do it well. I am making a surprise for dinner. That's the reason I can't go. Don't tell anyone what I am doing. At twelve o'clock you will know what it is."

She started Christina off with a great air of smiling mystery, and went back happily to her stove to see if the oven was right for putting in the loaves.

Two hours later she had the bread baked and the rolls in the oven. She was passing the window when she caught a glimpse of Christina and Matts coming back from the field. She stopped to watch them a moment, glad to think they had been able to do the work so quickly. But as she stood there, her eyes resting on the two, her heart seemed suddenly to give a great dip that left her faint and sick. She clung to the edge of the window, staring out as if unable to believe that her eyes had not deceived her. What

she saw was Matts and Christina, his arm round her shoulder, walking across the sunlit yard, looking in each other's faces as if they could not tear their eyes away. That was all, yet Lena, seeing it from the shuttered window, knew that heartbreak and tragedy were drawing every moment nearer to her door. In a flash she understood the mystery of Christina's recovered health and of her new joy in life. All Lena's vague anxieties, her unformed fears, assumed the terrible shape of reality. How cruelly blind she had been! Her poor child, so defenseless in her youth and ignorance against the growing strength of love! And Matts, beloved Matts — what did it mean to him, with his tender, dreamy nature and his inexperience of life?

Her first impulse was to hide herself like a mortally wounded animal. She was terror-stricken lest they see her with this sudden anguish in her face. There was hardly a moment to think, and she threw herself hastily on the bed and turned her back to the room. When Christina came in, full of anxious inquiry, Lena managed to say that she had a headache and would lie still for a little time. Christina was troubled and uncertain. She had never known her mother to be sick. What could be the matter? When, a little later, Matts followed her into the cabin, even more anxious, trying to think of something he could do to lessen the pain, Lena controlled herself with the strength of will acquired under such different conditions in years gone by, and asked to be left alone until the dinner hour. The quiet would rest her head.

Matts and Christina tiptoed out of the room and warned away the astonished children. Through the next two hours they worked at their tasks in the fields and in the barn with the bewilderment of those under whom the solid earth has suddenly shaken.

Lena lay prone on her bed, too torn with grief to think. What had she done to Matts and her dearest child? Had

she, in the selfishness of her love, robbed them of their chance of happiness? Was it any wonder that Christina's young heart should have opened to the sweetness of Matts's nature as a flower opens to the sun? Who was she, to whom his every word and motion was dear, to marvel at that? And Matts! How could he know that the hold of the child upon his affections was changing into that stronger passion that knows no rival? She had thought her wealth of love would be enough for him, but youth calls to youth. No words of middle age can ever cast the same magic spell as the sweet nothings of girlhood.

The slow tears forced their way through Lena's closed eyelids. Her love could no longer be free to rejoice in those she loved, but must be strong to save them from themselves. She was broken with the thought that it was she who stood between them; but the moral code she had inherited from her Lutheran forefathers was one of stern simplicity, and she felt there could be no peace in life for her or for them until that look was wiped from their faces forever.

How could she act without rousing their suspicion? Her heart told her that the worst pain for them would be to know why they suffered. If she could save them from that, the healing of their wounds would not be so long delayed. In the darkness of the coming night, when she need fear no tender, watching eye, she would be able to forget her own agony and think only of them. Let the darkness come quickly and shield her from their anxious love!

She went through the duties of the day, pale and silent. The headache served as an excuse for her changed appearance. After the evening tasks were done, she welcomed the night as a shivering wanderer might the warm shelter of a home. Matts and the boys had gone to the barn to sleep, that she might be undisturbed, and she lay on her bed fearing to move lest Christina, in the narrow bed near by, hear

and come to her relief. She lived that night through scorching suffering that took away the last illusion of youth, and killed in her forever the longing for personal happiness. Her whole nature became suffused with the tender mother passion which asks nothing for itself and yearns only to cherish and protect the beloved ones. When the first, almost imperceptible, shift of light which betokens the change from night to day fell upon her unclosing eyes, her mind was clear as to what she must do.

That night after supper, as they sat round the table in the dusk with the lamp not yet lighted, Lena said, suddenly: "I think I 'd better go to Red Falls with Christina to see a doctor for my headache. We could visit Olga for a day or two. Do you think you and the boys could get along without us, Matts?"

Matts looked up in distress. Doctors were usually not thought of in New Sweden unless there was serious sickness, and he was alarmed. But Lena's reassuring words quieted his anxiety, and he was soon all eager interest in the plan. It would bring not only health to Lena but pleasure to Olga and Christina. He glowed at the thought of the happy time they would have together, when the headache was once cured.

Christina was not so eager, and looked at her mother in doubt.

"Don't you want me to stay and take care of the boys, while Oscar goes with you?" she asked timidly.

But Lena would have no one but Christina, and plans were made for them to leave the next day. Matts urged an early start, so that Lena's hours of pain might end so much the sooner, and he busied himself in getting everything ready for her comfort on the long trip.

The next morning, shortly after the sun had cleared the horizon, the ox was fastened to the cart, and their few belongings, with a big jar of wild-plum preserves for

Olga's mistress, were put under the seat. The family gathered to see them go. Matts, in his warm, demonstrative way, kissed them both good-bye. Lena turned white as his lips touched Christina's. Did the girl flush and pale as he did so, or was it only the mother's fevered fancy that saw what it dreaded to see? She said no word, and the two rode for miles without speech. Lena's heart was heavy with fear, wondering what mystery of love and grief lay hidden behind the clear eyes of the slender girl at her side.

Olga welcomed them with joy. She took the jar of preserves to her mistress at once, and told her that two members of her family had come to see her, all the way from New Sweden. Mrs. Nelson exclaimed with pleasure at the preserves, and quickly gave Olga permission to have her friends stay with her and share the big bed in the servant's room. The ox was tied in one of the empty sheds near Mr. Nelson's mill, and Lena, who seemed to have forgotten about the doctor and declared that her head was better, and Christina, who was seeing a town for the first time, were free to enjoy themselves. But neither one seemed to have any desire to do anything except stay in the kitchen where Olga was busily at work. Christina had none of the eagerness of young interest, but sat quietly in her chair, as though only waiting for the time to pass when they could start home again. Olga thought she was shy and took her to a Swedish neighbor's, where there was a girl of her own age to show her around the town. She and Lena left her there and went back to the miller's to finish the housework, and to watch the two little Nelson children at their play in the back yard.

"Olga," said Lena suddenly, breaking into a story Olga was telling, "I want to get a job for Christina in the city. She 's nearly seventeen and she 's too old to be on the farm. Perhaps she can earn big money like you, and have pretty clothes."

Olga looked startled.

"I forget she 's not just a little girl. But can you get along without her?"

"Oh, yes," said Lena, with a deep breath, "she must go."

"Mrs. Nelson was asking me the other day," said Olga, "if I knew some nice Swede girl who could go to St. Paul to take care of four children. I told Anna Lund, a girl down the street, about it, but she does n't like children and she won't go. They 'll give a girl a dollar a week when she begins, and more afterward if she is good with the children."

Lena gripped Olga's hand.

"Ask Mrs. Nelson if they would please take Christina," she said in a low voice, full of intense feeling. "Ask her now."

Olga looked at her in amazement.

"There 's lots of time," she said. "Mr. Nelson is going to St. Paul next week and if Mrs. Nelson can find a girl he is going to take her with him then. It 's Mrs. Nelson's sister, Mrs. Bailey, who wants the nurse. They are American people, and Christina would learn nice American ways."

"Oh, yes, yes," said Lena, the hand with which she was peeling potatoes trembling a little as she spoke, "she will learn American ways. Then she 'll see we are only rough country people, and she won't care so much for us."

"And you will be glad?" asked Olga, in astonishment at her tone.

"Not glad," said Lena, her eyes intent on the potato peelings in her lap, "but not sorry to have her like the smart American girls."

When Christina came in a little later, Lena told her briefly of the plan. The girl stared at her pale mother, while she was speaking, as if she could not believe her own ears.

"I don't want to go away. I don't want to leave home!" she cried, her eyes filling with tears.

Lena looked at her without wavering.

"You will be glad to help us with the money you earn, Christina," she said quietly. "Think how happy you would be to buy shoes for Oscar and a new churn for me."

Christina looked up for a moment, a little light in her face.

"Could I do that?" But her expression quickly clouded again, and she asked, despairingly, "But how can I live so far away from you and the boys?"

"You could come home for a visit every summer," went on her mother, "and perhaps some day Oscar would go to the city to see you."

Lena's searching eyes never left the girl's face. Matts's name had not crossed the lips of either of them. Was Christina as afraid to speak of him as she was? Did the thought of him fill her mind as it did her mother's?

"I will go if you say I must," said Christina in a broken voice, hiding her face in her hands. "Shall I go home to-morrow to say good-bye?"

Lena felt as if she held the knife to stab love to the heart.

"Olga says Mr. Nelson is going up to the city Monday to take the girl to his sister's. There would n't be time to go home and come back. Olga and I will sew a new dress for you to-morrow, if Mrs. Nelson thinks her sister would want you."

Olga broke in with talk of the wonders of the big city, as she had heard them from Mrs. Nelson, trying to make what Lena had evidently decided Christina must do seem as attractive to her as possible. The girl listened, gradually quieting, though the sadness on her face did not lift. A little later Olga took her into the parlor to let Mrs. Nelson question her and decide whether she thought Christina

would suit her sister. While they were gone Lena sat by the table, her hands tightly clasped together, hardly able to endure the minutes until they should come back and tell her what answer Mrs. Nelson made.

When the supper table had been cleared that night, the Nelsons sat by the table in their hot, screened parlor. Mrs. Nelson was sewing, while her husband, in his shirt sleeves, was glancing over the little local paper. As she knotted her thread, Mrs. Nelson remarked, "I think that niece of Olga's is going to be a jewel for Adelaide. I would n't let the girl know what I think of her; she 'd get stuck up and spoiled and want more money; but she is the prettiest, cleanest little thing you ever saw, and she has a real way with children. Robert would hardly let her leave him when she put him to bed for me to-night, but she made him settle down in the quietest, nicest way. He even let her close his door. You know he 'll never let me do that."

Mr. Nelson listened, and then put down his paper.

"Do you think she could be ready to go with me day after to-morrow?" he asked. "I don't think I can wait until Monday, for the first of the new grain will be coming in the week after and I must be back to get everything ready." He looked at his wife inquiringly.

"I 'll go and ask her," said Mrs. Nelson.

She got up and went out into the kitchen. The three women were at work, finishing the supper dishes. Lena was washing, Christina, with quick deft hands, was wiping, and Olga was putting the clean dishes away in their places in the pantry.

Mrs. Nelson spoke to Lena.

"Could Christina go to St. Paul with Mr. Nelson Thursday instead of waiting till Monday? He wants to go earlier than he planned."

Christina, with a pang of dread, looked at her mother, but Lena kept her eyes fastened on Mrs. Nelson.

"Yes," she answered quickly, "she can go then just as well. I will make her a dress to-morrow."

It was speedily settled that Christina would be ready to go with Mr. Nelson on Thursday. Mrs. Nelson went back to the parlor to tell her husband, while Olga and Lena talked over the kind of clothes Christina must have.

Christina took no part in the discussion, but sat silent, watching the fading of the evening glow and the gradual coming of the night, as she could see it through the little window over the sink. She was unconscious of her mother's look of tender anxiety as her eyes rested on the young face, so pale and sad, in the shadows of the darkening room.

## CHAPTER XXVII

Lena rode the long miles home from Red Falls, feeling that life was one unending heartache. She carried the burden of many sorrows. She could not put Olga, whose tragedy seemed to have left her without hope for the future, out of her mind. The girl was like a wounded creature, to whom the past was a stabbing pain and the present an ill to be endured. Lena had not dared to show the sympathy that filled her heart, lest the flame of her own anguish break through. She had hardly even trusted herself to speak of Matts, though she knew that word of him was the most precious offering she could bring to the suffering girl.

The cart moved on in the August sunlight. Lena seemed to feel Christina's arms once more around her neck and to hear again the broken words of her good-bye, "Mother, my heart will break! How can I go?" She tasted afresh the sweet bitterness of her own reply: "Christina, you are not a child any more. Do your work well, and help us with your money. You and I lived through terrible years and did not complain. They must teach us to be brave now. Stand up, and wipe your eyes."

Lena, who longed only to weep with her in their common grief, had steeled herself against the young misery in those eyes. She had talked about the commonplaces of a trip to the city, of how best to carry her bag, and had urged her to learn American ways as quickly as she could. When the moment of parting came, Lena had said, quietly, "You must stay a year; then we can think about your coming home," but each word had the quality of an inflexible

command. Christina had made no reply, but she had held her head high as though the iron resolution of the mother's spirit had passed into her own.

Lena knew she could never hope to see her happy child again. When next her eyes fell upon that slender figure, would they see a woman, strong to bear even the denial of her own heart?

It was long before Lena could turn her thoughts from Christina to those who awaited her at home. She watched the roadside as she passed along, trying not to think. Here and there, the harvesting had begun, and the sheaves lay on the stubble like nuggets of gold on a bed of yellow sand. In many of the fields the cutting was being done by hand, but she stopped the ox at one place that she might watch the working of a reaper, which tossed, from behind its great whirling arms, bundles of grain all tied and ready to be stacked. The whirring click of the cutting blade, vibrating back and forth, was a cheerful harvest song, but, though she listened, Lena found no consolation in its sound. What would Matts say when she told him what she had done? What would he think? Would she be able to face his look of astonishment when she told him that Christina had left them? Could she pretend to him, whose whole spirit was transparent with honesty, that her going had nothing to do with preserving the happiness of their lives?

"I did not do it for myself," she kept saying, over and over, as though answering an accuser within. "I did not do it for myself. It was for you, my Matts and my Christina — I did it for you!"

There was no one but the ox to hear her, and no answer to comfort her in the empty world through which she moved, save that from her own heart. At noon she stopped to feed and rest the ox, by a little river which the road forded. The stream meandered back and forth, gradu-

ally undercutting its banks, and the water was muddied with the dirt it was carrying. Lena freed the ox, and then sat listlessly on the grassy margin, under a big cottonwood tree whose leaves rustled sharply in the light breeze and sparkled in the sunlight. Her eyes followed the eddies in the brown current at her feet. She could hear, far off, the sound of a reaper, but the fields were above the little valley through which the river ran, and she could see nothing but the green of the grass and the trees along the edge.

The ox ate slowly, wandering about a little, but never far from the waiting cart. He stopped grazing a moment to watch, as a harvester walked leisurely down the bank, a long scythe over his shoulder. The man did not look up. He followed the wheel tracks to the river and crossed at the ford. His feet were bare and his trousers rolled to his knees. He nodded gravely to Lena as he passed, not far from where she sat on the bank, but he did not speak. She saw him go steadily up the little incline without a backward glance and disappear over the opposite rim, beyond which lay the level fields. She wished he had said a word. She was sick of the thoughts which whirled round in her mind, the same uncertainty and the same dread endlessly repeated. She was glad when the ox had eaten his fill and she could start on again. But the slow motion of the cart brought her no peace. Her thoughts, like her shadow, moved with her, at one moment searing her soul, at the next bringing balm to her wounds.

They were both young and would surely forget. She was the one who could never forget, for she must live by their wrecked joy in each other. They should be spared the knowledge of her grief. She would always show them the face of happiness. Let her remember that.

It was dusk when she reached the cabin door. Matts and the children had rushed out at the sound of the wheels.

"Where 's Christina?" asked Matts, as soon as he saw that Lena was alone. "Is she walking behind?"

Lena, whose eyes clung to his face, saw him peer eagerly out toward the main road and take a step or two in its direction.

"No," she said, quietly, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact tone, "Olga found a place for her in St. Paul, and she has gone to the city to work."

"Christina gone!" they all cried.

Matts mechanically helped Lena from the cart, forgetting, in his astonishment, to give her a kiss of welcome. It was years before she could think of that omitted kiss without pain.

"Yes," said she, looking at him, all her brave heart in her eyes. "She is going to be a nurse girl and take care of four children. She will be with an American family and learn nice ways. Are n't you glad?"

She turned away as she saw the change in Matts's expression. Surely she need not punish herself by watching that telltale face! If she could undo the past, if in a moment of passionate sacrifice she could give him back his freedom, she would do it, but she could not bear to watch his look when he heard her news. The terrible thought came to her that he understood why she had done it. And if he knew that, he must, at the same moment, know that he had given his inmost heart to Christina.

Even in the sharp anguish of her pain, so much harder to bear than she had dreamed, the voice of her own life seemed to speak to her. "He loves me with a good love. I will be thankful for that. In time he will not be so sad. And I will be tender — and ask nothing from him."

One misery she was certain Matts was spared. He did not know, and in his simplicity he would not believe except from the girl's own lips, that Christina's young heart was given to him. The child love had so merged into the

maiden love that he could not know, as Lena did, how different it was.

Lena spent the evening talking of her visit and of Christina's plans and departure. She spoke cheerfully, holding Axel in her arms and kissing his tousled head now and then as she talked, but she did not look toward Matts nor direct any of her words specially to him. He asked no questions, but sat just outside the circle of lamplight on the table, in a silence utterly unlike him.

He slept that night with the older boys in the barn. Before he left, he said to Lena, his hand on her shoulder and his eyes on hers, "I am glad our little Christina is going to have a chance to see a bigger world than we have known." That was all, but it sent Lena to bed, to grieve, indeed, yet without bitterness. Christina was to be loved henceforth, by Matts as by her, — though through what agony of suffering she dared not guess, — only as one beloved child among many.

In the weeks that followed, Matts was always his gentle, kindly self, but Lena noticed, as a new thing, that he was silent much of the time and worked alone by preference. She said nothing about the change and was always cheerful when he was near, but there were times when she sat in the cabin, her busy hands idle in her lap, staring at the floor as if she had no strength to rise. If anyone came in, however, she was instantly on her feet, her smiling self once more, ready to answer questions or to help in any emergency. She grew thin and pale as the weeks passed, but she refused to spare herself and worked in the fields as well as in the house.

One warm October day she went out into the barn to collect some eggs for her cooking. She found Matts busy, shaking the grain from the heads of his experimental wheat into papers which he had spread out on the top of the oat bin. It was weeks since Lena had offered to help

him, but to-day, after a moment's hesitation, she stopped and sat down beside him, steadying the papers into which he was dropping the grains.

"Has the wheat turned out as well as you expected?" she asked, as she watched him measure the straw and add its length to the items he was writing on the paper in which the seed was to be wrapped.

Matts looked up with a flash of the old fire in his eyes.

"It is wonderful," he answered, smiling at her with something of his old freedom. "This stalk" — he touched one that lay beside him — "carries the finest grain that was ever grown in this country. Just look at it," he said, holding it up before her. "Do you see that beardless head, full of fat kernels held so close in the sheath that not a single grain has scattered?"

"Oh, Matts," cried Lena, "how happy you must be to have raised such a perfect seed, after all these years of work!"

"It has n't been work. It 's been play," answered Matts, shaking his head. Then he went on as though it was a relief to talk, "Did I tell you that my first planting ripened five days before any wheat in the county? Last Saturday I asked Burghardt and all the men that came into the store, and I found I beat them all by nearly a week."

Lena's heart leaped to see his old enthusiasm flame out again.

"Then are you through trying?" she asked.

"I can't be sure yet that the seed will always act the same," answered Matts, writing again on the paper in his hand. "Some of the straw is short and stout so that the rain can't beat it down and the wind would have to blow a regular cyclone to lodge it; but some from the same lot of seed is thin and can hardly carry the big heads. I want to be sure they 'll always be the same. You don't think I 'm an idle boaster, Lena, so I can tell you that, before I get

through, I 'm going to raise a wheat that will give at least fifty bushels to the acre and that will be pretty nearly safe from the wind and the hail."

Lena, who had known thirty bushels as a bumper crop, smiled at him as at a child telling fairy tales.

"You don't believe me," laughed Matts, with a return to his old boyishness, "but just wait!"

She had a sudden impulse to throw her arms about his neck and weep upon his breast, but she repressed herself with an iron will. "Not yet," she whispered to herself, "not yet!"

"The time will come when you 'll have to believe me, and then you 'll be proud of your husband," he went on in the same tone.

That word, "husband," with all that it implied, was like a tender touch upon her bent head. She was shelling a spike of wheat into a paper. A sudden tear, not of grief but of startled joy, fell into the package with the dropping grains, to glisten there a moment like the brightness of a promise. When she looked up to answer him, her face was that of the old trusting Lena, from whom the shadow of dread had fallen.

"I 'm always proud of you," she said, a little tremulously. Then she added in a lighter tone, "If you get up to forty bushels to the acre, I 'll think you are a miracle-worker."

"Fifty I have promised and fifty it shall be," said Matts with a smile, and he went on busily with his writing and sorting.

They worked together the rest of the afternoon. Matts was full of numberless plans and of talk of the future. When he came into the house in the evening, bringing the milk, it seemed to her that he moved and spoke with more of his old manner than for many weeks. She rejoiced, but with the delicacy of a love full of reverence she

put forth no claims of self, waiting humbly for the day of perfect assurance.

The first letters from Christina were full of desperate homesickness, and of the loneliness of a girl in a new and strange world. She longed to come back, and wrote asking her mother if she might. When that sentence was read, Matts made no comment on her appeal, and Lena did not ask his advice. She answered the letter, and Christina did not write again of coming home. Lena's heart was torn at the thought that the girl, who had been her comfort through the hard years, was once more — and this time alone — forced to accept the bitterness of life in the name of love.

In time the letters became happier. Christina had learned to love the children dearly, and their mother was finding less fault with her as she did things more easily in the strange American ways. She was making friends in the Swedish church to which the family cook had taken her, and in the spring she wrote of a young packer in a big fur company's store who sometimes came to see her in the evening and sat in the kitchen with her and the cook.

"He looks like Matts," the letter said, "but he is not half so handsome."

Matts laughed with the boys as Lena read, and as she glanced up a moment she saw that his look was unclouded. They talked of Christina that evening, Matts joining in for the first time, as Lena was quick to notice. They made gay plans for her to spend a week in the summer with them, and to see the new calf and the chickens that would soon hatch from the eggs on which the hens were already sitting.

Lena was silent, listening quietly and smiling now and then when they turned to her. The menace to their life was past. Nothing would ever be the same, of course, as though this tragic happening had never been. But it would

not be all unhappiness. Matts's vision of young love could never be realized, but it would fade into a tender memory of youth. In the early days of suffering, Lena had given up forever her long-cherished hope that he would some day love her as she loved him, but she was sure now that she could still make him happy. She thought wistfully that she could make him happier in some ways than a younger woman, for she would ask less for herself and she would love his enthusiasms more. She clung passionately to the thought that he was too great to need to love as other men did.

That night Lena slept with her hand in Matts's. Peace, like a faint light, rested on her pale face and softened the shadows of sorrow under her eyes.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

The next summer the crops started well. New Sweden began to rejoice in the thought of making up with two good harvests for the terrible year of the grasshopper invasion. The faces that gathered at Burghardt's store on Saturdays in May and June wore the nearest approach to a smile that those dependent on the weather ever allow themselves. A few farmers even predicted thirty-five bushels to the acre, but they were young and had not been sobered by experience.

In the spring Oscar finished at the little school. He and two other boys graduated, with much speaking of pieces and singing of national hymns, before an audience of admiring parents, many of whom could not understand a word that was said. They were all proud, however, of the learning of their children, and would have been willing to have them learn more if there had been any higher school in their district. But it was a help to have the boys back at work on the farm, without the interruption of the weeks at school each year.

In July the wheat was still doing well. Matts spent hours in the field, watching his crossings, marveling at the small number of seeds that bred true, and at the curious freaks of reversion in some he had thought most promising. There was some mystery about it beyond his understanding, which all the wisdom he could gather from his read and reread volume of Darwin failed to make clear to him. The children of his first crossings had been like a cradle full of changelings, some resembling one parent, some the other, and some apparently a combination of the qualities

of both. But these crossed grandchildren were like a pack of cards. They might be grouped, he thought, roughly in three divisions, but their variety within those divisions seemed infinite. He clung to the thought that there was some simple explanation for the tangle of diversity. It could not be blind chance that marked the stalk and the head and the grains with such clear differences. Back of each little change of form must be a cause. What was the law of inheritance working through these tiny grains of wheat? He had given them the spur of cross-fertilization, and he stood baffled at their response to his magician touch. He began to wonder whether, if he ever did find a perfect wheat in the multitude of heads, he could hold it true through the years, or whether it would shift of itself to earlier types — perhaps to a remote ancestral form of little service to man. He had noticed that there were always a few in each self-fertilized head that were like the parent. Perhaps endless care in selection would finally fix the form that he was seeking.

Early in July a few red spots began to appear here and there on the stalks or the leaves of the wheat and oats in the neighborhood. Most of the farmers paid no attention to such small imperfections in their splendid fields of grain. But Matts, who spent hours with his wheat, saw the beginnings of the infection, and became very uneasy as the days passed and the red spots grew larger and more numerous.

Lena caught his look of worry one noon when he came in from the field to dinner.

"Has anything happened to the wheat?" she asked with quick sympathy. Some of his disappointments and griefs she must sympathize with in secret, so those she could share openly drew from her an extra warmth of feeling.

Matts sat down at the table without his usual smile.

"I am afraid the red rust is going to be very bad this

year. No one else seems to have noticed it, but our fields are in poor condition, and I saw yesterday that Larsen's oats are speckled as badly as ours."

Lena stood still, with the dish of fried potatoes she was about to put on the table held in her hand.

"Will it spoil your wheat?" she asked. Her voice trembled with anxiety, as though the life of one of the children had been in danger. She set the potatoes on the table and put her hand on his shoulder. "Can't we save it from the rust as we did from the grasshoppers?"

Matts felt a tender drawing to this gentle woman who lived so quietly by his side, always eager for his happiness and asking nothing for herself. He was sure that she cared for his wheat as he did. He used to wonder at it, for she knew only vaguely what he was trying to do, and he was sure she did not share or understand his passion for experiment with the forces of life about him. But the deeper knowledge which months of suffering had brought him was opening his eyes to the motives that guided her. He knew that love for her children had given her the strength to live through years of horror, and he was more certain every day that love for him had become the great passion of her life. He was humbly grateful for her affection, and asked only to repay it by a life of devotion. He knew now, through his pain, that there lay within him possibilities of feeling more intense, more exquisite, more poignant, than any love he could give to Lena; but he had put away that knowledge with his boyhood dreams of adventure and romance. Such things were not for him. He would find his joy in the affection of this devoted family, and in the unresting pursuit of the mystery of generation in the wheat. He must ask for nothing more.

"Come with me this afternoon, Lena," he said, giving her the smile she had missed when he came in. "Perhaps you can tell me some way to get rid of the dreadful pest."

They walked out to the field together. The tiny spots could be seen on some of the green leaves and stalks, but the wheat had not as yet shown any ill effect of the growth of the fungus. The invisible spores, blown by the wind from the bushes where they first developed, had begun to penetrate into the tissues of the grain, ready to take the nourishment which was destined for the seeds of their host. The flowers in the heads were ripening and the spikes with their sparsely bearded tops danced in the light wind, as indifferently as if death, in the form of a red dust, were not floating in the air about them. Lena looked at the speckled stalks and sympathized, but to her, as to Matts, there seemed nothing to do but wait, and they returned soberly to the cabin.

Matts counted the days until the grain should ripen. If the first planting could be ready for the harvesting as early as the summer before, or if it took no more than the one hundred and fifteen days it had averaged in the first year of the crossing, some of it might be safe. It would not be long to wait now. A few days must tell. Matts tried to keep his mind on the other duties of the farm and to forget his wheat for a time, but, though he toiled from morning to night, he could not restrain his body from frequent visits to the plot nor his mind from ceaseless anxiety about his treasured planting.

All the farmers of the neighborhood were roused now. In their fields the ears of grain, which should be filling rapidly, were shriveling. The leaves were curling up, the stalks were drying, and growth was arrested as if in response to a signal from some malign, invisible spirit.

Every evening Lena went out with Matts to look at the havoc the day had wrought. The warm sun poured on the fields from morning till night. A few light showers had fallen in the last weeks of July, and everything that climate could do to favor a good crop had been done. Yet,

as they rimmed the field on their way, they looked upon dwarfed and spindling stands of oats and wheat, and patches of blighted rye. Matts said little, but Lena could see that he was suffering a depression which even his bright spirit could not throw off.

The experimental wheat stood like the rest, spotted with red, its leaves dry and rolling in upon themselves. But Matts, searching the yellowing tops as a lover might search the face of his beloved, gave a sudden cry of joy.

"Look, Lena," he cried. "here are two stalks that don't seem to be hurt by the rust!"

Lena looked with him at the two heads he held cupped in his hands. The stalks were short and sturdy, as the best of the crossed wheat had always been, and the ears, maturing early, were almost ready now for harvesting. They were plump and full, like well-fed children among starving companions, and they held their heads up with the careless ease of perfect vigor.

Matts turned to Lena with eyes of exultation, but he spoke quietly, as if he hardly dared believe the words his own lips spoke.

"It looks as if I 'd got the rust-resistant wheat the farmers all over the country are crying for," he said. "Oh, Lena," he went on excitedly, his emotions suddenly getting the better of him, "I believe it 's so! You see, this wheat matured so early that it got its growing done before the rust had time to drain the sap from the stems and leaves. There 's food enough left in that stalk for the last bit of ripening. Then the rust can do its worst and it won't hurt the grain!"

Lena smiled back at him, glad in his joy, though she could not forget, as he did, the acres of ruined grain about them. The two perfect ears made him happy, and she rejoiced at that; but the shriveled cereals in the fields must feed a family of hungry children for a whole year, and

she could hardly conceal her anxiety. Yet she said nothing of her fears to Matts, and tried to keep her face as unclouded as his when they went back to the cabin together.

He poured out to her his ardent plans for the future. The grains from those two heads, he explained, would be the only seed worth sowing next year, but he felt sure that in their tiny sheaths were assembled the virtues of all the generations.

He could hardly wait to get at his notes and find out to which group of crossings the two ears belonged. Lena helped him spread out his papers on the bed, and while he read, she fed the children. Every few moments he would burst out with some item in the records that made him feel more certain than ever that all the perfections for which he had been working through the years were contained in those two miraculous heads. As the children ate, they listened, feeling the contagion of his joy, but Jens was too excited to stay at the table. He went over to the bed and stood beside Matts, one arm on his shoulder, following the turning of the leaves. The two bent over, the dark head and the light one close together, until the papers had been all gone through. When the last one had been scanned, Matts turned, his head thrown back and his whole being alive with triumph, and seized the boy's hands.

"Jens, we 've got the king of wheats!" he cried. "There 's never been anything like it! Just think, boys," — he included them all in the fire of his enthusiasm, — "from the beginning, something has been ready in those little grains, waiting for the coming of ugly old Matts who milks the cow and hunts the bees with you. Now that something 's burst into life. Nobody 'll ever know what 's happened, but when people eat good bread every year, no matter whether there 's rust or drought or hailstorms or heavy winds, we 'll know why! That little plot in our field has seen a miracle. It 's the kind of a miracle that 's

happening every day, only nobody pays any attention. We gave the wheat its chance — and see what it 's done!"

He jumped up from his seat and went over to the supper table. Lena watched him with the tender, wistful smile that had become her habitual expression since Christina had gone. As he passed her, Matts laid his hand on her shoulder, affectionately.

"I 'll never forget," he said, as if in answer to her touching look, "who saved the precious seed from the grasshoppers."

Lena's pale face suddenly took on color. For a moment her smile lost its wistfulness as she busied herself seeing that Matts had enough to eat, and that Jens, who was inclined to be thin and languid, drank plenty of milk.

## CHAPTER XXIX

The next afternoon Matts was working on the edge of the woods back of the cabin, when he heard the sound of a horse being driven into the yard and Lena calling to him. A moment after, as he drew near, he saw the miller from Red Falls sitting in a light buggy, holding the reins in his hands, while two women, who had evidently just stepped out, were eagerly embracing Lena. The younger boys were gathered round and Oscar had stooped to lift some bundles out from under the back seat. Matts could see that one of the women was Olga, but, though his heart leaped, he could only guess who the other was. As he came close, he saw that the slender young lady with the flower-trimmed hat and the neat shoes was Christina. Her hair was loose and curly under the edge of her hat, a gay ribbon was tied round her neck, and her dress was of a cut unfamiliar in New Sweden. To Matts's country sense, she was suddenly changed and unapproachable, no longer the beloved little Christina of tender memory, but a stranger, separated from him by impassable barriers.

He took her hand timidly, without the kiss of welcome he had given to Olga, and looked at her for a moment. She flushed a little under his eyes. Then she smiled and said, "Don't be afraid of my new clothes, Matts. I 've got some old ones in a bag."

His searching expression did not change. "I was looking for the little girl who went away. Is she in the bag, too?" he asked, with the same intent look.

She did not answer that save by a heightened color. She

leaned over to speak to Axel, who was standing by her, and Matts turned to greet Mr. Nelson.

"I thought I 'd better come over to see how much wheat the rust has left in this part of the county," said Mr. Nelson. "I brought the girls along for a visit. Christina was planning to surprise you, and Olga wanted to come with her, so Mrs. Nelson let her off for a few days. I 'm going on north now, but I 'll be back Friday and pick the girls up on my way home. I 'll take Christina as far as Red Falls and she can go the rest of the way on the train. She 's not afraid any more." Mr. Nelson laughed as he added, "The green girls think anything with a noise is going to kill them."

Matts's eyes were constantly drawn from the speaker to the strange, new Christina, but he forced himself to answer Mr. Nelson's questions about the crops and the rust. He finally invited him to come and look at his plot of wheat. Oscar tied the horse to a post by the barn, and they all went out to the field. Christina clung to Lena and would not leave her side, and Olga walked with them. Lena told the two about the disaster to the crops and Matts's triumphant joy over his rust-resistant ears of wheat.

The last few days had made the contrast between the injured and uninjured grain more marked than when Matts had first picked out the rapidly maturing heads. The two stood upright, each glume filled out, the few awns at the upper end erect and firm, while all about them the speckled stalks drooped as though hardly able to hold up even so light a burden as the shrunken heads at their tops.

Christina and Olga, in turn, forgot the stricken fields and exclaimed with delight. They knew from experience what those heads meant to Matts. Mr. Nelson stopped suddenly and put his hand on Matts's shoulder.

"I 'll give you ten dollars for those two heads," he

exclaimed. Lena looked at the miller and then at Matts, full of excitement, but Matts shook his head.

"No," he said, decidedly, "all the money in the world could not buy them. I 'm not through yet making the perfect wheat. Some day I 'll give you a bag of it for nothing, but to-day those grains are worth more to me than many times their weight in gold."

Mr. Nelson stared at him a moment, and then turned to inspect the rest of the crop. As they walked back to the house, he and Matts were deep in talk of the growing of wheat, while the women, some distance behind, were sympathizing with Lena over the pitiful harvest the fields would yield.

When Mr. Nelson drove away, he took a last look at the tall young figure of Matts, standing in the road to watch him go, and at the little farm behind him, with its unmistakable signs of poverty and neglect.

"Pretty poor farmer," he muttered to himself, "but it looks to me as if he 'd got something there. Queer fellow! They say he 's a little cracked, and I guess they 're right, but there 's certainly something wonderful about those two ears of wheat. I wonder if the rust just happened to let them alone?"

He puzzled for a time. Then he put Matts's grain out of his mind, and drove along the road edged with the infected fields, wondering how he could mill such wheat without hopelessly discoloring the flour.

When Matts went into the cabin after seeing Mr. Nelson off, he found the women busily engaged in unpacking their bags and showing the boys what was in them. In Christina's bag were presents for everyone — an egg beater for Lena, a big pocketknife for Oscar, a ball for Jens, a cap for Rolf, and mittens for Axel which she had knitted herself. She handed Matts a little parcel wrapped in paper.

"That 's for you, Matts. I saw it in the window of a store in the city. I thought of you working in the fields and I saved my money till I had enough to buy it."

Her clear look did not avoid his eye, but the hands of both trembled a little as he took the package from her. Inside the outer wrapping was white tissue paper, and when Matts had unrolled that, at its centre lay a little, gleaming pair of forceps, delicately ridged at the tip, with a spring sensitive to the slightest pressure. Matts looked at it for a moment as if he hardly dared to touch it. Then he lifted it, and turned to Lena.

"Look at that!" he cried, holding it out to her. "Now we can cross the wheat without our clumsy hands destroying as much as they help."

Lena took the little instrument in her hand, her heart lifted as though on a great wave. In the first throb of his joy he had turned, not to beautiful Christina, but to her. He had said, "we," sharing with her the interests of his deepest life. What need she fear after this? Perhaps, after all, the wrong she had done to his youth by binding it to her maturity was not to be all tragedy, even for him. In her confusion of thought she could not speak. She held the forceps in her hand and smiled tremulously into his watching face. He urged Olga to look too, and thanked Christina for her gift.

"I owe you a kiss for that," he said, boyishly, and touched her cheek lightly with his lips. He was in a state of strong excitement. Mr. Nelson's astonishment over the wheat had given free rein to his own enthusiasm. The miller understood what wheat such as his meant to the agricultural world, as ignorant farmers and inexperienced women could not. Indeed, Matts was feeling for the first time the stimulus of intelligent sympathy, and he was borne up by it. Christina's gift fitted into his mood, and in the exultation of the moment his affection for her took

its lesser place as a part of the dominating interest in his life. To the man who lives in pursuit of an idea, internal conflict is death. Single-minded he must be. Any passion which threatens to create a divided mind must be denied, or it will in the end destroy what is more precious even than itself.

Olga spent the first night with the family before going on to her own home. They all sat round the supper table, eager to hear about each other's doings. The boys asked Christina endless questions about the Americans in the big city, and what they did and said. They were sure they must all be like their teacher, who had come from Winona and had been to school for a year in St. Paul. At first they were shy with this sister who wore her hair in a new style and had such dainty ways of eating, but when she had taken off her good clothes and put on her old, familiar, cotton dress, and had gone to the barn with them to see the new calf, they decided she was the same loving Christina who had cared for them since they could remember.

Lena could see the real change as they could not. The Christina who came back to them was the same in her unselfish, loving nature, but she was no longer the shrinking girl, dependent on her family as a flower on its roots. In the year of absence she had become a young woman, able to find her place in a big world and to care for herself. Lena would not let herself think through what days of struggle and nights of tears independence had been won. Like other mothers, she felt the sadness of seeing the child whom she had sheltered under her maternal wing forced at last to meet life alone. But the sorrow could not last. The new light in Christina's face, in part the product of the more varied and vivid life of the city but in greater measure the sign of her victory over her own timid, clinging nature, carried comfort to her mother. As she watched the girl, she became increasingly conscious of

a growing strength in her, upon which the mother might herself lean.

"She is safe, my darling is safe!" she kept saying over to herself, as she listened to Christina's answers to the boys' questions and to the laughter and fun round the table.

"How 's your beau that looks like Matts?" asked Oscar, merrily, when she had finished telling some stories about the doings of the four children under her care.

Christina blushed and looked quickly at Matts, who had been listening to her in silence.

"He takes me to church every Sunday night," she answered, confused for a moment, and then, turning to her mother, she added, "I met his sister, who works for a family in the city. She 's a nice girl and we visit back and forth."

The boys all laughed at her embarrassment and began to tease her. Her cheeks got redder and redder and her confusion greater. Suddenly Matts rumpled up his hair, and drawing a long face, said, "He never could be as handsome as I am now, could he, Christina?"

They all turned to Matts and forgot to look at Christina while he was making one absurd face after another to show them how beautiful he really was.

"You 're the same funny Matts as ever," said Christina, when they had stopped laughing at his antics.

"And in spite of all your good clothes you 're the same nice little Christina," answered Matts, with the first smile he had yet given her.

Lena noticed that his manner to Christina after that was more natural and unrestrained, more like the old affectionate way of the young man with the child, and that once in a while Christina turned to him with a strange, puzzled look, as though searching for something she dreaded and feared to find.

The next morning Matts took Olga home in the ox cart. Her bag was put under the seat, and she held in her lap some sewing materials which Mrs. Nelson had sent as a present to Brigitta.

Matts was saddened by the shadow on Olga's face. She already looked years older than he, with the hopelessness of expression which ages more than time. Matts, remembering the frantic girl he had once held in his arms, and his vain effort to give comfort where there was none, felt that grief had indeed robbed her of her youth. This sober middle-aged woman seemed but the shell of her younger self, drained of the passion which had once torn her asunder. She had the air of one who goes through the work of the day painstaking and faithful, but whose own life is over.

Matts felt a sudden pang of terrible and understanding sympathy, but in his nature suffering always found its healing in renewal of affection. He put his hand on hers as she sat silent beside him.

"Olga," he said, "it 's a good world when we have each other, is n't it?"

She lifted her eyes to his face, but her look did not change.

"It 's a hard world for everybody," she answered, dully. "We don't need to expect anything, and then we won't be disappointed."

The bitterness in her tone halted him for a moment. He did not answer at once, but sat listening with her to the slow squeaking of the cart wheels as they turned on their worn axles.

"I don't think it 's so bad as that," he said quietly, as though thinking out loud with her. "We 've got to be more careful about what we expect. We are n't children any more, Olga, and we know we can't have the moon, but if we wish for a candle, maybe we 'll get it."

He turned to her with his affectionate smile, waiting for her answer. She leaned her head against his shoulder with a sudden impulse of tenderness.

"If I lived with you, Matts, I 'd be a better woman. But you 've got your life and I 've got mine, and you 'll have to let me live it the best way I can. I like Mrs. Nelson and she 's good to me. Some day, when she does n't want me any more, I 'll come home and live on the farm with mother and father, and never think again of the Olga who wanted things."

Matts put his arm across her shoulders and they rode on without talking, finding in their mutual affection a moment's balm for suffering and disappointment. The warm sun beat upon their backs, and the quiet woods along the way shut from them the tragedy of the ruined fields. An occasional kingbird flitted across the road with a quick flash of white. A solitary hawk, poised on motionless wings in the air above them, suddenly dived like a stone into a near-by field, where it spied an unwary mouse or moving prey. A little rabbit, upright behind a sheltering bush, with its ears alert for danger, fearlessly watched them coming and did not dart away until they were nearly abreast of him.

The brother and sister felt the nearness of each other as a strength for the future, and when Matts jumped from the cart in front of the house and helped Olga out, he thought her look had softened and brightened, as if she could still see some light in the grayness of her days.

## CHAPTER XXX

The next spring Matts planted the two heads of wheat which he had carefully saved from the ruin of the year before, and waited with high hopes for the coming of the rust. No farmer in the district watched with more anxious eye for the first red spots than Matts, but he was probably the only person in the whole state who felt bitter disappointment when June and July passed with hardly a sign of the pest that had brought such destruction twelve months before. All the wheat for miles around was filling with plump kernels and the sun shone day after day upon the promise of a rich harvest.

Matts's little plot, planted in a fresh place and carefully weeded and cared for, was filled with a splendid stand of grain. Each seed, under his watchful eye, had sprouted and flourished. The short sturdy stalks, the leaves, and the heads were without blemish. Matts's pride in his success was great, but he still longed for a more complete test. He could estimate with certainty now that his wheat would give at least fifty bushels to the acre. It would ripen a week earlier than any other grain yet grown in the Northwest. Its stout stalks would withstand the wind and beating rain, and, through early maturing, might escape the worst of the hailstorms. But there was still the rust, that terrible curse of the farmer, to be combated. Until he had a wheat that was safe from that, Matts could not feel that his work was done.

The summer passed and the crops throughout New Sweden were bountiful. Matts put away a precious bag of

seed, but he was not satisfied. He looked forward to the next summer, hoping that the rains in the coming spring might favor the spread of the rust.

Axel was becoming a source of great anxiety to Matts and Lena. His violent temper was increasingly dangerous as he grew older and stronger, and nothing seemed able to check it. He had once, in a fit of rage, struck Rolf with a heavy stick, and although he had not permanently injured him, the boy was unconscious for twelve hours and not quite himself for some days. Matts dreaded leaving the farm even for an hour, for his strength alone could cope with Axel when his temper was aroused. Lena wept bitter tears over this fresh tragedy. She carried a double grief, sorrow for the afflicted boy, and anguish over the heavy burden of care he brought to Matts. Matts's tenderness to her and his patience with the boy did not lessen her misery of self-reproach, and there were days when she felt as if she were only beginning to know what real unhappiness was. Her sickening aversion for Olaf Jensen had darkened her life, but her love for Matts threatened to cast an equal shadow over her days, so intensely did she suffer in his pain. She felt at times as if, instead of being freed from Olaf, he had returned in his child to torture her through the intensity of her love.

One day, after a fit of temper, Axel fell at her feet, foaming at the mouth and twitching from head to foot. He was unconscious for a long time, and after he came to himself he was languid and miserable for days. Lena knew from her nursing experience what the years ahead held for him and for her. Several times after that he injured himself in falling at the beginning of an attack, and once he would have burned himself severely on the stove if she had not been in the room at the time and snatched him from danger. From that hour she lived in the constant

presence of fear. Her one effort was to protect Matts from the heaviest part of the burden. Since he had first realized that Matts was the only member of the family strong enough to control him, Axel had begun to dislike and shun him. Lena tried, as well as she could in the cramped cabin and on the small farm, to keep them apart. Axel seldom spoke to Matts, and the sullenness on his face only increased when Matts noticed him. But Matts's kindness was unaltered, and he treated the child as he did the rest.

That spring, hoping to break down the boy's distrust, which seemed to have increased with the close contacts of the long winter, and to win his friendship, Matts took him to the fields with him to work at the planting. Axel at seven was very large for his age and heavy in his movements. He sowed beside Matts, furtively watching him like a sly animal but never speaking, even in answer to occasional friendly words. He showed no interest in anything, not even in the experimental wheat which the others inspected daily. This year Matts had not tried to select the best seed, but had sowed all he had raised where he could keep close watch of every sprout. As the two walked along, scattering the oats which they were planting, Axel kept as far from Matts as he could. He never turned his head toward the wheat near by, which was pushing its green tips through the black earth, nor did he look at anything except the freshly harrowed dirt under his feet.

One morning Oscar came running out to the field where the two were sowing the last of the rye, carrying Matts's shotgun in his hands. He cried excitedly that two rabbits were eating in the garden and that Matts could get near enough to shoot them if he would hurry. The rabbits were so numerous that the garden had begun to suffer, and Matts kept the loaded gun on a rafter in the barn where he could reach it quickly. He had started toward the garden when he saw a scurrying rabbit run from behind

the barn and dart toward the woods at the end of the rye field. He aimed quickly and pulled the trigger. The rabbit tumbled over and lay still. Matts put down the gun, and ran with Oscar to see if he had killed it. The creature had been shot in the head and was quite dead. Oscar picked it up, and the two turned back. At the same moment, Matts saw that Axel had picked up the gun and was pointing it at them.

"Put it down!" shouted Matts. "It will go off if you touch it."

Almost before he had spoken, there was a spurt from the end of the gun and a loud report. A thin puff of smoke hovered near the end of the barrel and slowly dissolved in the air. Oscar saw Matts waver a moment and put his hand to his side.

"Are you hurt?"

"Get the gun from Axel," cried Matts, pointing to the boy with a shaking hand. "He may strike someone with it."

Oscar ran to his brother and snatched the weapon. Axel tried, furiously, to fight him off.

"Matts killed the rabbit," he kept shouting, "so I killed him!"

Matts had by this time staggered up to them.

"The gun was loaded with bird shot, so I can't be badly hurt," he said, faintly. "You boys help me in, and your mother can take care of me."

But Axel refused to let Matts touch him, and ran away toward the woods. Oscar helped Matts as well as he could until they were close enough to the house for Lena to hear his call for help. Together they got the wounded man into the cabin and on his bed. Lena tore off his shirt to see where he was shot. In her terrible anxiety she had hardly heard how it happened. There were scattering holes over his chest where the shot had lodged, and one at least must have penetrated the lung, for he was breathing with pain.

There was not time to wait for a doctor. The nearest one lived eighteen miles away, and he might be still farther from home when a messenger arrived. Jens was sent running, panic-stricken, to Mr. Burghardt to get word to the doctor to come when he could, but Lena wasted no time. With the little forceps, destined for such a different use, she probed in the blackened pits in Matts's fair skin. One after another she laid the blood-stained shot on the table beside the bed. The more deeply embedded she would have to leave for the doctor's skill and instruments, praying they would not mean death before help arrived.

Not until Matts's wounds were bathed and covered with fresh cloths, and he lay quiet in a half-stupor, could she stop to ask Oscar what Axel had done and where he was now. The full realization filled her with horror. She sent Oscar out to find the boy. He did not have far to go. Axel was hiding in the barn, holding the dead rabbit, which had been dropped, forgotten, in the field, and saying over and over, "He killed the rabbit, so I killed him."

Through the anxious days that followed, Lena stood guard over Matts. She kept the gun hidden under her bed, and the door locked at night against the boys, who, except for Oscar whose help she needed, slept in the barn. The doctor, when he came, did little more than Lena had already done. The deeper shot he could not reach. Those Matts must carry to the end of his days. The doctor listened gravely to the story of the shooting, and of Axel's temper and convulsive attacks. He asked particularly if the boy had ever injured himself in a seizure.

Some weeks later, when Matts had recovered and was at work again, a little troubled in his breathing but outwardly as well as ever, a stranger came to the cabin and asked for Axel. He said that he was an agent of the state, and had been sent to visit them and see what could be done for the boy with the sick mind. Lena was terrified and

wondered who could have asked him to come. She did not think of the doctor, with his kind, observant eyes and his many questions, until the agent told them that it was he who had written him of a child in constant danger of injuring himself, who had already attacked another. The doctor had asked the agent to visit the family and see what could be done for the boy. The visitor then told them of the state institution from which he came, where such afflicted children were cared for, and educated, and protected both from injuring themselves and others.

Lena could only weep for answer. Matts touched her bowed head gently, and said to the man, "These poor mothers must think first of their own. We know it 's no kindness to him to keep him with us. We 're poor people, and we can't take care of him as we should. But it 's hard to send him to a strange place, among strange people."

"You can bring him yourself," suggested the man. "Or his mother could go with him. We want the parents to come and visit us often."

"Perhaps some day, but not now," said Matts, hesitating. "What can we do if we can't take him ourselves?"

The agent explained that he was going about twenty miles north, to get a boy whose parents were sending him to the institution, and that he would be back the next day. If Matts and Lena had decided by then to let the boy go, he would take Axel along with him. He added that it was a lucky chance for them that he was here. He might not be that way again for many months.

"There are more children that need to come to us than we can take," he explained, "but we choose first those like your poor boy, who are a danger to others."

Lena looked at him without speaking. To her inexperience the very name, "institution," was a word of dread, and the thought of sending her boy to one was far worse than the thought of his possible death. But Matts and the

man talked so quietly and in so matter-of-fact a manner about the possibility of Axel's going, and of the training and care he would receive, that her terror was insensibly lessened. When the man finally went on his way, she was able to talk about his suggestion without the wild tears of her first recoil.

All that day, whenever they had a moment together, they talked the problem over. To Matts it was all very simple — a sick, afflicted boy, and a beneficent state with wisdom and power to take care of him. But to Lena it was the punishment of an innocent child for the tragedy of his parenthood. If she could have flayed herself or taken the atonement upon her own shoulders, it seemed to her that her suffering would have been less. But the thought of the child, forced to accept the penalties of a nature for which he was not responsible, tore at her heart.

When Lena saw Matts's distress over her agonies of self-reproach, she pulled herself together. Let the boy go, since Matts thought it best, and let her have courage to bear what must be borne without sacrificing Matts to the tragedy of her past. When the agent returned the next day, Axel was ready for the trip and eager to go.

"Come and see him when you can," the agent called over his shoulder as they started away. "We are always glad to welcome the fathers and mothers."

Lena watched the disappearing wagon without a tear, but like many another mother whose afflicted child has been taken from her to be cared for by someone else, she was never again safe from the sudden onset of grief. The most trivial thing — a coat Axel had once worn, a word he had tried to use, a laugh like his, was enough to stab her anguished heart. In the daytime, when the air rang with the shouts of happy boys, her anxious thought flew to the absent one, perhaps lonely and longing for her companionship. Sometimes at night, when she suddenly woke,

the sight of the other children quietly sleeping about her would bring her no peace. Instead, she would turn on her pillow and fold her arms as if shielding a little head, defenseless but for her against the cruelty of the world. It would be long before her body, rigid in the position of protection, relaxed and she slept once more. Such pain tortures more than death, for the wound is constantly reopened and the sad heart knows neither rest nor forgetting.

Lena took up the routine of her days, wearing a smiling face. No shadow must be allowed to darken the cabin where Matts made his home. Only occasionally did he, coming suddenly upon her, catch an expression in her brooding eyes that haunted him like the memory of a disembodied sorrow.

## CHAPTER XXXI

Axel had been a year away from home. Letters came now and then from the superintendent, saying that he was doing well but was slow in learning. His convulsive attacks were getting worse, and the doctor of the institution advised against his going home for a visit. Lena was very quiet and kept by herself as much as she could for a few days after that letter came, but she made no outward protest. She was ready to bear whatever came to her now without question. In the spring Christina went from St. Paul to see Axel, and her letter telling of the visit Lena read and reread until it fell to pieces. She wrote that Axel seemed happy, that he did not ask to go home, that he was kept clean, and that he was growing fast. She added that all the children were fed good American food. That comforted Lena. She was thankful that Axel, at least, did not have to eat the meagre food of an impoverished farmer, as the rest of them did. She imagined all sorts of delicious dishes bearing the magic name "American," which he must be enjoying. Christina wrote in a postscript that Axel seemed quiet and not so quick-tempered as he had been. The doctor told her that it was because his disease was getting worse. She knew her mother would be sorry for that, but thankful that he would not try any more to hurt the other children in his rages. Lena did not speak of this part of the letter, but she went about her work with a lighter step after she had read it. One dread, at least, was lifted from her overburdened heart.

That summer the longed-for rust failed again to appear. If his wheat had not borne so wonderfully, Matts would

have been more disappointed, but the sight of the thickly clustered heads made him resigned to waiting still another season for the final test. Eight days before any other wheat in the region was ripe, he had harvested the heavy yellow grain from his experimental plot. It had borne more than the fifty bushels to the acre for which he had hoped. Next spring, for the first time, he would have enough of the perfected wheat for his entire planting. He need save no seed from the product of his other fields for that purpose, but could take it all to Mr. Nelson's new grain elevator, and have it graded and shipped to the flour mills in Minneapolis.

When, early in October, he set out on the long trip to Red Falls with his load of wheat, drawn by the ox and a young steer he was breaking, he took a little sample of the selected seed with him. He wanted Mr. Nelson, who was an expert on different sorts of grain, to test it and tell him what kind of flour it would make.

Most of the trip he spent with the package of rounded grains in his hand, exulting, as he went by field after field, yellow with stubble or black with turned-over soil, at the thought of the wheat these great stretches would bear when his seed was ready for everyone's use. Could he do as much for the oats and rye after he had finished with his wheat? Did some far-away northern mountain or some icy plain in the Old World carry a seed he might cross with that in the oat field he was passing, and so develop a richer grain for fattening cattle and a better food for making hens lay more eggs?

As he sat on the unyielding bags of wheat, riding through the warm sunlight in his squeaking ox cart, life seemed to him rich with promise. He turned over the store of ideas and observations with which his mind was filled, and found fresh interests at every moment. He slept peacefully through the night in the cart while

the oxen browsed near by. The time did not seem long.

When he reached Red Falls, he stopped in front of the mill, and, jumping from the heavily laden wagon, went in through the door labeled "Office." Mr. Nelson sat just inside, at an untidy desk. His hat rested on the back of his head, and he was stooping over, trying to sort out the jumble of bills and papers heaped in front of him. His clothes were powdered with flour, and his hands had the white grime of the miller which always seems clean. The great, grinding stones which turn ceaselessly upon each other, crumbling the broken grain to powder between their gray surfaces, have the same frosted look.

The office served to connect the mill with the big, angular grain-elevator, which towered, in the glory of its fresh red paint, high above the trees and buildings of the little town. Its blank walls and tiny, unwinking windows under the eaves could be seen for miles around. Any stranger, catching sight of it, knew at once that the railroad, in its steady advance into the country of expanding wheat farms, had reached Red Falls.

Mr. Nelson greeted Matts pleasantly, dropping his confusion of papers with a hopeless sigh.

"Got some grain for the new elevator?" he asked, catching sight of the loaded wagon through the little window by his desk. "The farmers are all hurrying in to get it under cover before the snow comes." He got up and started toward the door to show Matts where to unload, but Matts stopped him.

"I have some wheat here I want you to test before we go out," he said, pouring some of the grain from his little package into Mr. Nelson's hand. The miller looked at the wheat with a critical eye.

"Pretty big kernels!" he said. "Did you raise this?"

"Yes," answered Matts, happily. "You remember the wheat that stood up against the rust two years ago? You

wanted to buy two ears from me then. This is raised from that seed."

Mr. Nelson said nothing, but he stood chewing the kernels, considering as he chewed. In a few minutes he took the elastic mass from his mouth. It was pale cream-color, almost white, and sponge-like in its consistency. He squeezed it in his fingers, and then pulled it out in a long thread.

"You could n't have finer wheat than that," he said with emphasis. "It's wonderful!" he went on as he again tested its elasticity. He showed an enthusiasm which, as a buyer of wheat, he seldom allowed himself to display. "It will make bread as white as snow, and big light loaves besides. Matts, if you can raise enough of this for seed for the farmers in this section, we can sell every grain to the mills in Minneapolis at the top price and have them asking for more."

He put the wheat back in his mouth and chewed it again, as if to reassure himself that he had not exaggerated its virtues.

"No," he repeated, "you could not have better wheat. How much will it yield to the acre?"

"This was a good year for wheat, of course," answered Matts, his whole face radiant with joy at the miller's appreciation, "but I estimated that it yielded over fifty bushels to the acre."

"The best any farmer did round here was thirty, and thought he was lucky to get that!" exclaimed the other.

Matts did not speak, but Mr. Nelson noticed, as if with new eyes, the fine intelligence of his face and his quick responsiveness of expression as he stood leaning against the desk, holding the seed carefully in his hand.

"He 's not the numskull they all say he is," the miller thought. "He may be a poor farmer himself, but he 'll make every other farmer rich."

"Don't forget that you have promised me a bag of seed," he said aloud.

"You 'll have to wait a year or two," answered Matts, smiling. "I want to be sure about the rust. Then I can give you some wheat that will be worth waiting for."

"Well, remember me when the time comes," repeated the miller. He opened the outer door and started down the step.

"I 'll go with you," he said, "and weigh your grain."

He directed Matts to drive his wagon on the platform scales which stood beside the elevator entrance. As the oxen set foot on the wooden base of the scales they were frightened by the vibration, but Matts urged them along until the wagon was resting on the middle of the platform. Then he stopped the animals and, leaving them standing there, went back to watch the weighing.

The big door into the elevator was thrown back and the miller stepped inside to read the scales by the light that came through the opening. Matts followed him in, looking with curious eyes at the dim interior, lighted only by the small windows near the top. He could see leather belts, fitted with buckets, reaching up out of sight, and long ropes dangling from high beams above him. His eye was caught by ladders built into the walls, on which a man could climb to the mysterious, sloping bins aloft. Everything was overlaid with a fine dust like that of threshing, which blurred and softened the outlines and veiled the shapes of the compartments. There was no sound except the click of the weights on the scale as the miller shifted the counterpoise.

"Read that scale and see what you make it," he said. Matts bent over the adjusted balance and read the total. His reading and the miller's agreed, and they started in to unload the wheat. It was dumped in the grain pit, to be

sampled and graded before it was carried in the buckets on the endless belt to the bins above.

"Pretty fair," grunted Mr. Nelson as he helped Matts open an empty sack, "but no better than the rest of the grain round here. We 'll grade you No. 2. Next year I 'll look for better even than No. 1 from your fancy seed."

Matts felt the package in his pocket and smiled quietly. There was no need of haste. Each year added some little perfection to those seeds and he was conscious of no hurry.

When the grain was all in the bin, the sacks were thrown back on the wagon and it was weighed again. That total was deducted from the first and then Matts knew with how much grain he was credited and how much money he would have to live on until the next harvest came around. It was not a great deal, but it would pay the interest on the mortgage, and buy some new tools and some heavy boots for the boys, and perhaps still leave a little.

Matts heaped the wagon high with bags of middlings. He was thinking of the pretty little heifers he had raised from calves, who would freshen before long and could not give milk many weeks on hay alone. The butter from their cream would more than pay for their food, and with the skimmed milk he could raise more calves. He and Oscar would soon have to build a bigger barn to hold them all. The young creatures were fairly stepping on each other now. How would it be when the new calves appeared and needed space to move around on their long, wobbly legs?

"I suppose you 'll go over to the house to see Olga before you start home?" said Mr. Nelson, as Matts threw his last bag on the wagon. "She 's a good, steady girl. Does n't want any beaus, and seems satisfied if she can only go to church all the time. Wonderful how well she manages with that arm of hers. I hope you 'll let her stay

with us until the children are grown. Mrs. Nelson would n't know what to do without her."

Matts did not reply. He drove the oxen up to the side of the mill and threw some hay on the ground in front of them. He left them munching peacefully and crossed the street to the frame house of the miller. He went through the yard, past the narrow little side porch, to the back door. Olga, from the kitchen window, saw him coming and, full of joy, ran out to welcome him. Matts thought, with a start of surprise, how pretty and well she looked. But when the cooking was finished and she had left the stove, her color faded and he noticed that her cheeks were thin and hollow and that there were dark shadows under her eyes.

Mrs. Nelson came out to greet him and to say a few pleasant words about Olga.

"See that she gives you a good dinner," she said, smiling at him over her shoulder as she went out.

"Is she kind to you?" asked Matts, after she had gone. He was watching the look of age in Olga's face with a deep sadness, as though seeing it for the first time.

"Oh, yes," answered Olga, indifferently, "she 's pleasant enough. There 's lots of work to do, but she lets me go to church whenever I want, so we get along."

"Have you a good pastor?" questioned Matts.

The flat quality in her tone made him uneasy. Her voice sounded like that of one to whom nothing is of interest. She roused a little to tell him about her minister and her church. Matts, feeling her stir of response, plied her with questions. He was surprised to see what importance the doctrines of the Lutheran church, which had ceased to have meaning for him since the early days of his thinking, had assumed in the mind of his sister. As she talked, the flame of ardent conviction and the proselyter's zeal, coming occasionally to the surface, startled him. Was it pos-

sible that she was finding in the religious passion, more tenuous and mystical than the love of woman for man, satisfaction for her tragically starved emotions?

His sympathy and interest broke down her habit of silence, and she talked to him eagerly as she washed the dishes and cleared up the kitchen. In return, she asked him to tell her all the details of the home life, of her father and mother, and above all of Axel, whose fate was a family sorrow. The sturdiness of independence which made the farmers of New Sweden such courageous pioneers doubled the suffering of any family which had to accept institutional care for a member, and weighed it down with a sense of disgrace. Matts did not share the feeling of the others. He had seen his wheat seed bring forth strange forms, and some of these in turn bring forth good wheat. He saw both his perfecting grain and the distorted brain of Axel as part of the strange life-impulse at work about him. One moment it wrought for beauty and the next for disaster, but the great experiment, in which the universe serves but as the plastic form, goes on forever. Who was he or anyone else to take praise or blame, to be proud or humiliated, by the mystery of its results?

"Do you know, Matts," said Olga, "I think Christina is going to marry the young fellow she wrote about — the one that looks like you. Mrs. Nelson says Christina told her sister about him, when she was asking her whether she would stay with her another year."

"I 'm glad," said Matts, slowly, and fell silent. His own youth lived in him again, shadowy and tremulous. He felt the rise of a sudden emotion choking him, but he put it down with the deep breath of a swimmer who strikes out in stormy waters. He reached for his cap and stood up.

"I must be starting on my way," he said, "if I 'm to get home to-morrow."

Olga looked at him sadly.

"I wish you never had to go," she said. She was holding a dish she had been wiping in her hand, but she laid it on the table and went over to him, putting her hand on his shoulder. "It does me good to see you, Matts. You know that you are dearer to me than anyone in the world."

She flushed with emotion as she spoke, but she kept her eyes upon him. His look was as steady as hers, and in both faces, intensifying the strong family resemblance, was the same expression of suffering, seeking its solace in the tenderness of mutual affection.

## CHAPTER XXXII

That Christmas the pastor wished to have a specially beautiful service at the church across from Burghardt's store. He was newly come from Sweden, and he hoped to bring back to the settlers memories of their festival days in the old country, and to let the children born in America have a celebration like those the fathers and mothers had known in their own childhood. Not to be outdone, the families of New Sweden planned festivities in their homes, and all December was given over to great preparations for the day.

Early in the month the baking and cooking began. Sausages and headcheese, roasted meats, cakes, and breads of all kinds were made ready, and big yellow milk-cheeses lined the shelves in the cellars or were set on beams under the roofs.

The Jensen boys had new shoes waiting under their beds for the great day to come. Their old ones would do well enough until Christmas. Lena had promised them that she would make a new dress for herself, but though she went almost every week to the store with the eggs, she never seemed able to find material that just suited her. They began to joke about her being so hard to please; Matts told the boys in a mock whisper, the last time she came back empty-handed, that she would never be satisfied with anything except royal velvet. Lena smiled at him and told him it was the truth; she wanted something finer than Burghardt had to sell.

"Nothing is good enough for her, anyway, is it, boys?" said Matts, who sat by the table, watching her as she

darted around, getting things ready for their supper. As she passed by him, carrying a dish to put in the oven, he asked, "Lena, don't you ever get tired of waiting on so many hungry boys?"

She stopped beside him, murmuring a word of tenderness. He looked up and their eyes met in a glance of understanding affection. A timid yearning, which never quite melted into the happiness of satisfied love, haunted her expression, but month by month her look grew more serene, as if she felt in Matts a deeper response to the outpourings of her devotion.

When she had come back in the late afternoon, walking through the early winter twilight, Matts thought he had seen her carrying a bundle, but it had disappeared almost immediately after she came into the cabin. He decided it must have been some household necessity which she had put in its proper place, and he thought no more about it. But Lena, many times in the days still remaining before Christmas, felt the package, hidden securely under her bed, to assure herself that it was still there.

She could remember the customs of the season in Sweden as Matts could not. One of them she had taught the boys. She sent Oscar to scatter corn and wheat on the roof of the barn, so that the birds might be glad of the holidays, too. Only a few of the feathered creatures ventured from their hiding places in the bush-tangled hollows which sheltered them from the winds, but some bold blue jays perched on the low roof and filled the air with the sound of their harsh calls. They ate the seed greedily, and the boys threw up more when light snow covered the grain. The tiny four-toed tracks they made threaded the slope like a lacework of life against the dead white of the snow. In the quiet of the winter noonday their notes were vibrant with energy. Jens watched them with delight, and stood motionless at the window as long as he could catch

a glimpse of the blue-and-white flashing of their flight or see their jaunty, swinging walk along the peak-board of the barn.

The day before Christmas Oscar had brought from the edge of a near-by marsh a small swamp spruce to serve as a Christmas tree. The boys set it up in the corner of the cabin, and fastened to its branches some little candles Lena had moulded for the occasion. They festooned it from top to bottom with strings of popcorn, a decoration unfamiliar to the native Swede, but much admired by the children, who had first learned from their American teacher how to make the garlands. A few gifts, sent by Olga and Christina, were placed at the base of the tree, and the simple preparations for Christmas were complete.

Nils and Brigitta came at dusk to spend the night in the cabin and to go with the family in the early morning to the service at the church. Nils was his usual speechless self, but Brigitta seemed unable to shake herself free from the thought of the cows whose milking would be delayed the next morning, and of the calves who would be without food long after their feeding time. She began to forget her worries, however, when she saw the joy with which the presents she brought were received by the children. Each boy had a pair of warm stockings, knitted by Nils, and Matts a woolen shirt she had made for him. The boys put their stockings on immediately, and their new shoes as well, to show how beautiful they were together.

Lena was in a state of happy excitement. She had just taken out of its wrappings a brightly colored picture of the manger scene which came to her as a gift from Christina. The boys, with exclamations of admiration, declared that not even the pictures their teacher hung on the schoolroom walls were so lovely as this. Lena propped it on a branch of the tree where they could all look at and enjoy it. After the presents had been passed round for everyone to see,

Brigitta brought out a crock of honey-and-hazelnut cookies she had made for the boys. They all ate busily, too happy even to speak. Lena went over to her bed and took from beneath it a parcel done up in brown paper. She carried it to the group sitting by the tree and, putting it in Matts's lap, said, trying to speak indifferently, "Here is my velvet dress, Matts. I want you to open it."

Matts looked up in astonishment.

"So you got it after all?" he exclaimed. "That 's good! Come, boys, and see if we think it is pretty enough for her."

They all crowded round him as he undid the paper and took out a big brown book, bearing the title, *Encyclopedia of All Knowledge, Complete in One Volume.*

"Where did you get it?" asked Matts, his eyes wide with wonder and delight.

Lena answered him, her words fairly tumbling over each other in her joyous excitement: "You read the book Mr. Hill gave you so many times, I thought you 'd like to have another, so I sent the egg money to Olga. I told her to ask Mr. Nelson to buy a book for you the next time he went to St. Paul. Olga wrote that he said he thought you 'd like this one because everything in the world was in it. Olga sent it to me in Mr. Burghardt's care. I 've had it hidden under my bed for a week."

Lena was breathless as she ended.

"But where 's your dress?" asked Matts, looking up from his eager turning of the pages, as if suddenly recalling something he had forgotten.

"Mother 'd rather give you a present than have the best dress in the world," said Jens, as he leaned on Matts's shoulder to see what the book was like.

Matts seized Lena's hand and held it close a moment, with an expression on his face that was rich reward to her for her effort to give him pleasure.

"You spoil me, Lena!" he exclaimed. "But this is wonderful. I never knew there was such a book!"

He bent over it again, absorbed. Once in a while he called the attention of the others to a page here and there, but he gradually lost himself in the reading and fell silent. The rest talked together for a time, then, one by one, lay down on the beds to get a little sleep before the time for starting to the church. The room was soon still save for the rustle of leaves as Matts read on. All except Lena had dropped quickly to sleep. They were familiar of old with Matts's way of forgetting everything when he had something fresh to read, and they knew that it would be hours before he would think of rest.

Lena lay quietly on her pillow, her dreamy look embracing the beloved figure. She could not share Matts's passion to know, which was the very heart of him; but she could share his vigil, her eyes filmy with love, and be humbly thankful — if not that he was hers, at least that she was completely his.

At four she got up and spoke gently to him, telling him what time it was. He started and stared at her a moment, as if not quite seeing her.

"You like the book, don't you?" she asked, smiling at his look.

His bewildered expression broke into a glow of understanding.

"Dear Lena," he said, putting his arm about her, "to think of the joy you are giving me! And you are happy about it, too."

She kissed him and clung to him a moment. Then she quickly woke the others and helped them get ready for the cold, dark, early-morning ride to the church.

Matts laid the book carefully on a high shelf, and went out to the barn with Oscar and Jens to yoke the steers to the sled. They hung lanterns, which had been filled and

carefully trimmed the night before, on two uprights in the front of the sled, so that the road would be somewhat lighted. When the oxen had been led outside, they closed the door of the barn and shut the suddenly awakened cows and calves once more into the dark and warmth of their thick-walled quarters. The oxen moved in the half-light without misstep, and took their places on either side of the pole of the sled without direction.

The brilliance of the stars was still undimmed by any hint of daylight. The Milky Way lay like a clear, sparkling frost across an arc of the heavens. All except Matts sat on the sled. He walked at the oxen's heads, his mind a turmoil of the ideas he had been absorbing in his uninterrupted hours of reading. He had not finished the A's, but he felt as if he already had subjects on which to ponder the rest of his life—the amœba and the Absolute, the infinitely little and the infinitely great; alphabet and anthropology; the ant and the ape, all within a few pages of each other. He marveled that the lakes of New Sweden had from their beginning been full of tiny living things, invisible to his eye and until this moment unknown to him. As he trudged along the snowy road, his path fitfully revealed by the swinging lanterns, he thought afresh of the universe as a stupendous mystery, waiting for the mind of man to probe it. What greater joy in life than to take part in mastering some of the problems of that unraveling! Surely he, in his small corner of the world, might hope before he died to add his tiny bit to our understanding of its workings. The exultation he had felt at moments as he watched the development of his wheat so lifted him now that he walked the snowy road like a colossus.

Even at a distance they could see the lights of the church shining across the snow in widening yellow bands. On the different roads leading to the town sleds were visible, growing more distinct as the sky brightened, coming to-

ward the common centre. Each one seemed to be attended by a will-o-the-wisp, swinging high on a pole, like a chained creature of light trying to break its bonds and fly away. In the churchyard were gathered bundled men and women, shouting jovial Christmas greetings to the newcomers as they drew near and stepped out on the snow.

The Lindbloms were just ahead of the Swensons, and the two families walked into the church together, August and Matts with linked arms in the manner of old friendship. August secretly admired and wondered at Matts, as in their boyhood days, but he could not help comparing the shabby unkemptness of Matts's farm with the neat barn and flourishing fields of the Lindbloms. When they crossed the threshold of the church, he was saying to himself that a man has got to succeed in this world. It is not enough to be full of strange ideas, and to talk so that one wants to listen forever; a man must keep his machinery from rusting and his turkeys from getting lost in the woods. But he listened with the old absorption to Matts's whispered words until they got inside the church and both fell silent.

The room was brightly lighted and the walls were decorated with green boughs which masked the yellow pine boards and threw graceful shadows upon their surfaces.

At five o'clock, while the darkness still held outside, the service began. The beautiful old hymn, "Be greeted, joyful morning hour," rang through the room with the throb of a rich emotion. Matts watched Lena, her face uplifted, singing with the look of quiet content which he had begun to see as something new in her expression. He was blessed, indeed, in such a love as hers. Let him rejoice with her in the coming years. He sang, his eyes still upon her face, and his deep bass rang out mellow and full.

His mood was broken into by the stir of late comers, and a man and woman walked up the aisle together. The man pushed into the place beside Matts. He glanced up and was

startled to see that it was Karl Burghardt, dressed in stiff city clothes and looking carelessly about him, oblivious of the reverent attitude of the worshipers. His companion, a stout young woman with feathered hat and shiny shoes that squeaked as she walked, took a seat beside the Larsen children across from them. She shook out her skirts and loosened her scarf, but her eye wandered constantly to Karl as she did so.

The lovely music went on, but Matts was suddenly silent and disquieted. His thought flew to Olga, as if swift to defend her from the approach of an enemy. He tried in vain to force himself back to his earlier absorption in the service and to forget, this one day, the sorrow for her which he carried in his heart.

The minister, dressed in black, his long gray beard almost covering the white pleated kerchief at his neck, prayed and preached words of comfort and of hope. He had put away the threats of punishment for the time, and dwelt instead on the promise of salvation. Matts found less than usual for his intelligence to criticize, but, in spite of his best effort, his mind wandered from the words of the old man in front of him to dwell with increasing disgust upon the actions of the young man beside him.

Karl had coolly surveyed the congregation and his eye had finally come to rest on Hilda Johnson, who was just back of him on the women's side of the church. In the past year she had grown to be very pretty and was the acknowledged belle of New Sweden. A winter spent at work in Blackbird had taught her the art of wearing clothes, and even in the cheapest calico she was without a rival among the girls. Karl had known her as a rather plain child and had never paid any attention to her, but his manner suggested that he was determined to know her better now. His hungry eyes did not leave her. She was uneasily conscious of his stare and tried to keep her face averted. Two or

three of the older people were distracted from their devotions by the backward-gazing young man. One other person was stealthily observant of what was happening. The young woman who had come in with Karl sat, apparently listening to the minister, but becoming more and more agitated as she caught glimpses out of the corner of her eye of the fixity of Karl's gaze. Matts felt a sick sympathy for her, and then a surge of thankfulness that Olga was not sitting where this poor woman was, enduring the anguish and humiliation of Karl's indifference and insult.

When the sermon was over, they stood again and sang. Karl's head was still turned to keep Hilda's flushing face in view. Matts crowded down his disgust and sang with the rest. The sacred words of rejoicing that Christ was born rang out and filled the humble room.

The music went on, and the swelling chorus chanted the glory of motherhood. The manger and the bending figure of Mary were in the minds of all. Matts looked across at Lena, whose life was founded on her love for her children. Yes, and on her love and belief in him! Let him not betray that faith! More and more, as the months passed, he was becoming able to think of Christina with tender equanimity. In the thrill of the singing to-day he was ready to accept life with the acquiescing simplicity that comes to those who suffer and endure.

When the service ended, the white light of the morning was pouring through the windows, dimming the yellow of the lamps till they were pale splashes of color against the walls. The church was filled with smiling faces and the friendly talk of festival time. Everyone went forward to greet the pastor, and those who could recall a childhood in Sweden talked with him of the days already becoming dim in their remembrance. Their faces were turned hopefully to the future and they were rapidly forgetting the past.

Brigitta was impatient to get home and take care of the cows. She had that anxiety for the well-being of the kine which has developed in the peasants of the North through centuries of dependence for food and fertility upon the animals of their barren farms. Nils was less anxious, but he yielded to Brigitta's determination, and he and Matts went out to get the oxen ready. The last thing Matts saw as he left the church was Karl in intimate talk with the rosy Hilda, while his pale wife crouched on a wooden bench, her desolate look bent on the oblivious two.

"Karl has come to spend the holiday with his uncle and has brought his wife with him," said Lena as they started off. "I tried to talk to her a little, but she can't speak anything except German. She has n't been long in this country, Mr. Burghardt says, and she is slow in learning."

"Hilda's father 'd better look out for her, if Karl is going to be here long," suggested Brigitta, firmly. "I have been hearing stories about Karl that make me glad Olga got over her fancy for him."

"Karl's wife is a nice-looking, plump little woman," said Nils, comfortably. "He is n't going to run after the other girls when he 's got her to cook his meals for him."

Brigitta shut her lips tight. It is no use pointing out things to a person who cannot see butter on the end of his nose. She and Lena would talk it over sometime when they were alone. It takes women to understand the ways of a faithless man; most men are blind, except perhaps, now and then, one like Matts. Brigitta had a feeling that, for all his absent-mindedness and indifference to the gossip so dear to her, Matts saw deep into people's hearts. Whether he spoke or not, he understood. What did he think of Karl? How could he explain the mystery of Olga, so silent and fragile, hiding her shriveled arm and her unhappy heart from the sight of those who loved her most?

## CHAPTER XXXIII

THAT spring, for the first time, Matts sowed all his fields with his own perfected seed. The season had been early and by the middle of April the ground was harrowed and ready for the planting. Lena deserted the house and went with him to the fields, sharing with him the excitement of scattering with a lavish hand the seed so slowly developed through laborious years. She remembered a little newspaper clipping he kept in the book Mr. Hill had sent him and which he had once shown her. She could not remember it all, but there were some sentences she had clung to in memory. Even though she could not understand them very well, they made her think of Matts at work on his wheat: —

"Indomitable patience, the finest powers of discrimination, and sound judgment must be exercised during many years. If any of these qualities be wanting, the labor of a lifetime may be thrown away."

Nothing of all these things had been wanting in the fair-haired man who was walking across the field in front of her, sowing his seed from the bag which hung at his waist. His labor was not to be thrown away, but was already at the threshold of success. As she walked behind him, feeling the plump grains slip through her releasing fingers, her heart swelled with pride.

When Matts turned at the end of the field and came back toward her, tossing the seed as he came, she noticed that he stooped to the left continually. After his recovery from the gunshot wounds he had found it eased his

breathing to bend over a little to one side. He had made light of it, assuring Lena that it would be better soon, but to-day he leaned over more than he ever had before. She watched him anxiously, her nurse's sense disturbed by this evidence of imperfect recovery. When they met in the middle of the field and she asked him whether he was in pain, he smiled and asked her in turn how she could talk of lame sides when she was sowing the greatest wheat the earth had ever been privileged to grow. He passed her, still smiling. She walked along, trying to quiet the beatings of her fearful heart as she threw the grain on the black earth, where the kernels lay like golden raindrops just about to sink into the ground.

After the sowing was finished, Oscar drove the ox, fastened to the brush-harrow, back and forth over the smooth field, lightly covering the seed and closing the pores of the earth so that the precious moisture should not escape. Never had Matts finished the planting with such joy and high hopes for the harvest. His face shone in all his working hours. If only the longed-for rust would come this summer, he would have the answer to all his questions.

During May and June he went about his work with growing effort, which he tried in vain to conceal from Lena's anxious eye. When she spoke of his increasing stoop, he insisted that nothing was the matter and would sometimes try, though with a face of suffering, to straighten himself when he saw how frightened she was. But she could not be deceived. For years she had watched his every motion. He no longer walked with the vigor of his splendid youth, but with the manner of one bearing constant pain. She and the boys protected him as far as they could from the heavy labor of the farm. He spent happy hours in his wheat field, watching the rapidly maturing grain, and seemed to get better.

In late July Lena had agreed to go to the Lenstroms'

to take care of Mrs. Lenstrom with her first baby. When the time came, she went reluctantly. Matts's promise that he would leave the hardest of the work to Oscar was the only condition on which she would consent to go, but even so she departed with an anxious heart.

Everything went well at the Lenstroms'; the baby was sturdy and the young mother recovered quickly. Lena tried to forget her own anxiety in ceaseless activity day and night in the service of the little family, doing not only the work of a nurse but that of the woman on the farm as well. She was nearly ready to leave when one morning she saw a buggy, drawn by Burghardt's fast-driving horse, come into the yard. Oscar sat on the seat, holding the reins in his hand and looking searchingly at the house as he came near. She rushed out, white with terror.

"Yes, it 's Matts," said Oscar, in answer to her agonized question, trying to speak quietly. "He 's very sick. The doctor says you 're to come home." Tears rolled down his cheeks as he spoke.

"Oh, mother, I don't think he 's going to get well."

Lena's heart seemed to drop a beat and then start again racing like the pulse of a frightened bird. Her lips were white, but she said steadily, "Of course he is going to get well. I will come in a few minutes."

Oscar felt the strength of her courage and pulled himself together. He drove the horse to the trough by the pump and watered him, and when in a few moments Lena came out of the house, followed by Mrs. Lenstrom, still pale and languid, he was back at the door waiting for her. He put the package of her belongings under the seat and helped her to climb into the buggy. Mrs. Lenstrom called a few farewell words of sympathy to them which they hardly heard. Lena waved her hand, but she did not look back. Her face was set on the road home.

Oscar whipped up the horse and they drove along at a

rapid pace. The road, as straight as though laid between the green fields with a ruler, occasionally crossed a gully. As they came up from the hollow the horse's trot would drop to a walk. Lena could hardly restrain herself from jumping out and running, so terrible was her impatience. Most of the time, however, the horse kept up a steady trot which covered the miles rapidly. Little by little Lena got from Oscar the tale of what had happened since she left home. Matts had grown steadily worse until he had finally been forced to stay in bed because of increasing pain in his side. The night before he had been burning with heat, so that he could not bear to have any covers on his bed and could not sleep. He was muttering and talking and calling out, not knowing where he was or who the boys were. By two o'clock the children were terrified and Oscar went to the Burghardts' for help. There he found that the doctor was not more than a mile away, spending the night at the Berglund farm after setting Knut Berglund's broken leg. As soon as it was light he came to the cabin to see Matts. He said the trouble was bloodpoisoning, starting in the old wound in the lung, and that Matts was a very sick man.

"So then I came for you," ended Oscar, with a break in his voice.

His mother questioned him feverishly. She wanted to know all the details of the past days; who was with him now, had he spoken of her, was he suffering? She held her hands tightly clasped as if that helped her to control the anguish in her heart that threatened to force its way out to frantic expression. That must not happen, for it would leave both Oscar and herself without strength for what must be borne. She had no eyes for anything about her. She was conscious of nothing except the tan ribbon of road ahead and of an almost overwhelming impulse to force the horse to a desperate gallop. But she knew that Oscar

was pushing him as fast as he could go and she restrained herself with a stern effort of will.

When the tired horse stumbled into the little yard, Lena hardly waited for him to stop before she leaped from the buggy and ran toward the house. She saw Brigitta through the door and felt a throb of gratitude that he had not been left all day without a woman's care.

Brigitta took her hand as she came in and led her to the bed.

"He sleeps and wakes," she said. "He does not know me."

Lena bent over the bed where Matts lay, flushed with fever, tossing from side to side. She put her hand on his forehead.

"Matts," she said, softly, "do you know me?"

He lay still a moment as though listening, and a gleam of recognition shone in his heavy eyes.

"Lena," he whispered.

She kissed his cheek in sudden passion, and waited breathless for another word. But the light in his face faded quickly and the restless tossing began again. It alternated with a stupor which to Lena was far more terrifying. She sat beside the bed, speaking softly to the boys when they came up to her, but never turning her eyes from Matts's face.

Brigitta told her what the doctor had said. He had left some medicine to be given every hour and he would try to return the next day, but he did not hold out much hope. He said there must have been trouble in that side for months and that now it had become too much even for Matts's vigor to fight.

Lena's mind could not accept what she heard as true, though as she saw the terrible gray color that succeeded the flush of fever on Matts's face, the conviction grew upon her that the crowning tragedy of her life was come.

Brigitta moved about the little cabin doing what had to be done; the boys tiptoed in and out, caring for the animals and doing the necessary work of the farm; neighbors came now and then with offers of help and kindly sympathy; but Lena sat at Matts's side, his hand in hers, or attempted whatever her knowledge of nursing and the doctor's orders could suggest to lessen his pain, pouring out in every murmured word and in every gentle touch upon his tortured body the tenderness of her great love for him.

But no love and no care could save him now. Three more days he burned with fever as his youth and strength fought the creeping poison that was destroying his life, and on the fourth his strong body lay still.

Lena closed the eyes and crossed the restless hands, quiet at last. The children were sobbing about her and Brigitta and Nils were shedding the difficult tears of the old. But Lena was dry-eyed. She rose from her seat by the bed like one suddenly blinded, and, with a gesture forbidding the others to follow, walked out into the gray of the early morning.

Without him there was nowhere to go or to stay in the whole world. She moved across the yard, drawing slow, measured breaths as if fearful of the sudden rise of emotion. She was hardly conscious of where she was until she noticed that her feet were on the path leading to the field where Matts and she had worked together planting the wheat four short months ago. She moved along with more purpose, as if she might hope to find him there, since he was no longer in the cabin behind her.

The air had all the clear quiet of an early August morning, waiting for the warm sun to speed the growth of the crops that covered the surface of the ground. Lena walked to the edge of the field. It was a level sea as high as her waist, and almost changed from green to gold.

As she looked across the top of the wheat toward the

wood beyond, the few delicate awns rising above each head looked like a faint golden mist lying over the field. Every spike was perfect. The heads, heavy-laden as they were, could not bear down the sturdy stalks which grew close together with their roots firm in the black earth. She followed the edge of the field, before her eyes the image of Matts's stooped figure as he had walked back and forth scattering the seed through the bright spring days.

Just beyond the thick rim of trees was a new clearing, planted in April by Johan Olson, who was to be married in the fall. The trees thinned in one place and she could see through to the part of the field where Johan had sowed his wheat. She looked at it, startled at what she saw. The grain was all yellow. Could it be that Johan had found an earlier ripening wheat than Matts's? A pang shot through her heart. She pushed her way through the undergrowth and stood on the edge of the field. The green of the wheat had changed indeed, but not to the beautiful gold of maturity. It was speckled from top to bottom with the dreaded rust, and the heads were shriveling and drying on their stems. Never since it had first opened for settlement had New Sweden seen such a sight.

Lena stood as if turned to stone.

"The rust has come, at last," she whispered, as if speaking to someone close to her, "the rust you have waited for so long, Matts!"

Suddenly she threw herself on the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. She wept until she was so exhausted that she could weep no more. The risen sun poured its slanting rays upon her prostrate form, where it lay as if flung helpless on the unyielding earth. There was the tiniest rustle from the crisping stalks of the damaged wheat as a little wind began to stir. Lena lifted her head, no longer seeing the ruined field before her eyes but the beautiful acres of fertile gold behind her. She pulled herself to her feet.

Through her hopeless misery one thought forced its way: Matts's work was not yet done. He had made the perfect wheat, but it was left to her to see that his seed was planted wherever such grain could grow and give rich harvests.

If he could only have lived to know what he had done! The certainty came upon her, like a great light in the darkness, that at the end he must have known! In those last days, when Oscar, hoeing near by, had seen him lingering over the ripening grain, he must have seen that the rust had come and that his wheat was safe from its menace.

When she finally went back into the darkened cabin, she was her quiet self once more. Whatever had to be done, she did. She made all the decisions as calmly as though they did not concern herself. She spoke seldom and asked neither for sympathy nor help. When Olga and Christina came, broken with grief, she was the tender comforter for them both. The only time any of the family saw a change in her pale face was when she came in, after having been away from the cabin for a time, carrying in her arms a great sheaf of golden-green wheat. Her haggard look wore a faint pink as she placed it on Matts's breast, and her lips moved as if in fond speech with a beloved companion.

Even at the grave, a few yards from the place where she and Matts were married, she stood among the mourners without a tear. She knew how much they all had loved him, perhaps more than they had realized in the careless days of living, but it was not love he needed now. He had seen something of worth, more than mere living, and she could not rest until his dream had come true.

The day after the funeral she wrote to Mr. Nelson, asking him to come and look at Matts's wheat. He had seen a few heads two years before when it was still waiting for the test of the rust. Could he come now?

The answer, written on a big sheet of paper with a pic-

ture of the new grain elevator at the top, said that Mr. Nelson could not come himself, but that he had shown her letter to an agent of the Agricultural Department who was in Red Falls for a day or two. The man was studying the rust all over the county and would be in New Sweden before long. He had promised to look at her farm when he passed through. Mr. Nelson added a few kindly words of sympathy and regret for the death of Matts and signed his name with a scroll that curled across the entire sheet.

Lena carried the letter inside her dress next her heart as if it had been a cherished love missive. Twenty times a day she hurried to the door, thinking she heard the sound of wheels turning into the yard. Whenever she slipped from the house the boys knew that they would find her in the field, watching the wheat as though it were the face of one dear to her.

Christina and Olga in a few days went back to their work and the cabin was very quiet. Oscar showed a sense of responsibility beyond his years and rapidly took his place as the man of the family. Lena's dependence upon him developed all that was best in him, and he tried in little unexpected ways to take Matts's place as the joy-giver of the home. But Lena's dearest comfort was Jens. His grief seemed for the time to have mastered him. The boy was inconsolable. He mourned for Matts day and night and the beloved name was constantly on his lips.

Lena, who dared not give way to grief lest her yielding weaken her determination to finish Matts's work, felt a relief to her overburdened heart in Jens's tears. She found the illusion of Matts's presence, which the boy's constant speech about him brought, a sweet consolation. The child's faithful affection saved her from the grief of silence engulfing the memory of a lost loved one, which, to those who are left, is a second and no less tragic death. To such unforgetting tenderness the little cabin, whether it baked in

the sun or resounded to the beat of the rain, whether it stood out against the drive of the blizzard or cowered under the swirl of the cyclone, was a humble shrine, whose altar light was a kitchen lamp and whose votaries worshiped at the routine tasks of the toilsome day.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

The chief agronomist in charge of the wheat investigations for the state of Minnesota sat in his office, in the new building at the State Agricultural School, turning over his mail. Letters were piled high on his desk and seemed to him to bring nothing but desperate appeals, in all languages and in diverse spellings, for help in fighting the devastating blight of the red rust whose ravages were covering half the counties in the state and threatening to impoverish the entire farming population. The wheat which had started out so well in the early spring was shrinking to nothing. Word was coming from every direction that eight bushels to the acre would be a fair estimate of the average crop.

Agents out in the field studying the pest were sending careful reports of the distribution of the bushes and plants on which the earlier development of the rust took place, and from which the spores blew through the air to come finally to rest on the stems of the wheat and other cereals. They found the particular types of undergrowth so widespread as to be impossible of eradication. The only hope seemed to be in finding, somewhere on the circle of the globe, a wheat which would resist the rust. So far, they acknowledged, such a wheat had not been discovered, but until it was, the cereals must take their chance against infection.

The chief looked wearily out of the window. If this was the best they could do in face of such a desperate need, he would have a hard time getting money for their work from the next Legislature. He could see old Senator Peterson

from Alexandria making a speech in denunciation of the loafing agents of the department, who spent their time going round the state and sending in traveling-expense accounts which the hard-working farmer had to pay — and then got nothing for his money. It may be all very well for Peterson to complain, the chief thought, as he ran his hands through his hair and leaned back in his chair with a sigh, but he would like to tell him that they were trying to conquer a pest which had been destroying the crops of man since the dawn of history. What right had Peterson to find fault? He ought to be thankful for his eight bushels and be willing to take the money from the sale of four of them to keep the investigation going. It would be his best chance of getting his four back and forty more besides.

No word yet from Noyes, who was at work in Redskin County where the pest had been particularly bad. The farmers in that locality were not making so much complaint as those in some other infested regions. He had always found that new settlers made less fuss than older ones. Perhaps they hoped for less and were humbly thankful for what they got. He could not help wishing there were more of that kind as he bent over his desk again to sort out the letters that must be answered immediately from those that could wait.

About four o'clock that afternoon a young man carrying a leather bag came bursting into the office, slamming the door behind him as he entered.

"Good gracious, Noyes," said the startled chief, "what are you making such an infernal racket for? So glad to see me you want the whole building to know it?"

The young man paid no attention to his chief's words. He sat down on the nearest chair and bent over to open his bag. On top lay four or five stalks of wheat which the young man lifted carefully and held in triumph before his chief.

"Do you see that?" he cried. "Well, those heads come from a five-acre field in Redskin County, each stalk as fine as that, and every other field for miles around ruined with the rust!"

The chief looked at the wheat with an astonishment that satisfied even the ardent Noyes.

"I never saw such fine wheat in my life," he said, "in rust years or any other."

"There never was such wheat," went on the young man, his words fairly tumbling from his mouth in his excitement. "And it's not accident, either. I came upon something in finding this handful that makes me want to work for a better America. Talk about your unmined gold!" He checked himself and went on more calmly. "Well, this is what happened. You know Nelson, who has put up the new elevator at Red Falls. I dropped in to see him and talk over the wheat situation, for he is a pretty intelligent fellow and keeps his eyes open. He showed me a letter from a woman in New Sweden. She could n't write very well and she certainly could n't spell, but anyway she wanted Nelson to come and see her wheat. He told me I 'd better look in on her. Her husband, who had just died, was a queer fellow — not much of a farmer, but the kind that liked to putter round, trying different things to see how they would work. When he was a boy he got his father to plant some sorghum, the first ever tried in that part of the country. He 'd read about it somewhere and thought he 'd like to see how it grew. He never did anything with it himself, but the other farmers near there got the idea, and you know what a great crop it is in that county now. Nelson says he does not think many of them remember it was young Swenson that started them to growing sorghum. He 'd forgotten it himself, and it just came back to him as he was talking to me."

"A lot of the Swedes in the southern counties talked to

me about sorghum as if I was trying to get them to grow poison," observed the chief grimly. "Funny how you have to fight some people to make them get rich!"

"This Swenson did your fighting for you in Redskin County, but he never got rich," said Noyes, fervently, "did n't care about getting on, I imagine. Too full of other ideas. Well, anyway, I did n't get to New Sweden for some time, and when I did I made up my mind I 'd stop, so I could keep my promise to Nelson. I stopped all right. I could hardly make up my mind to leave. Why, Chief, it 's the greatest thing that 's ever happened to wheat in this country. What do you think that fellow had been doing for years? An ignorant farmer, who went to school about ten months in his whole life, has been experimenting in raising wheat seed, and he 's beaten you and me with all the education that 's been thrown away on us, besides!"

"Don't be too hard on us," broke in the chief, with a smile. "There 's such a thing as luck, you know, in every experiment."

"There was no luck in this," answered Noyes. "That fellow knew what he wanted and he went for it year after year, until he got it — and then the poor fellow died before he knew what he 'd done!"

Noyes paused a moment as if his mind were crowded with bits of memory he was trying to weave together into an intelligible whole.

"His wife did not seem to know very clearly where he got his idea. She thought he read about it somewhere first; but I don't know where he could have done that. I did n't see any books around the place. But he sent to the north of Sweden for some hardy mountain wheat, and he crossed that with some good seed he found by chance in his own field, and selected and crossed for years, till he got this. He 's been planting this seed for two years now, waiting for a bad rust year to try it out. It 's certainly got the

trial this time. I never saw such a place as that county. It 's a battlefield covered with dead."

"Did the farmers think we were good for nothing because we had not stopped the rust with a wave of the hand?" asked the chief, anxiously.

Noyes laughed. "They think we ought to be miracle-workers with such big salaries and our railroad fares paid in addition," he said. "But we 've got the miracle right here in our hands," he added, looking down at the sheaf he held. "When we have enough of this seed we can laugh at the rust."

"What have you done about getting hold of it?" asked the chief.

"The widow is a nice kind of woman. Does n't seem to care about the money part of it. She kept saying that her husband wanted to make a perfect wheat, and then he hoped everyone could have some. I think she would have been willing to give it all away, if I had said so. She is going to give us a bushel to experiment with and perhaps distribute for trial in different parts of the state. The rest I have arranged with Nelson to sell as prize seed. It will go for a big price. The farmers in the neighborhood are all talking about it and they 've been coming from miles round to get a sight of the wheat before it 's harvested. Nelson says she 'll get enough to pay off the mortgage on her farm and still leave her some money to buy more land if she wants. He 's a good fellow and he 'll be honest with her."

The chief was shelling a few kernels and chewing them to test the gluten. Neither spoke for a few minutes. Noyes suddenly burst out, a flush on his bronzed young cheek: —

"You know I said when I came in I wanted to work for a better America. Well, I do. What makes me feel bad is to think of a man like Swenson, who could do such wonders, left there alone with nothing to help him and no one

to understand him. Just think what he might have done if he 'd been found and given a chance! It 's all very well to build railroads and open up mines and cut down the forests, but here is something that 's priceless, right at our doors, and we don't even look at it! I 'll never be satisfied with my country for all its boosters until we take time to pick out the really great ones in our midst and give them a chance. I 'm tired of our pampered mediocrity."

"Don't get excited," said the chief soothingly, taking the bolus of wheat from his mouth. "We 'll call this the Swenson wheat, if that 'll be any comfort to you. Your Swede might have done bigger things if he 'd had a better chance, but I 'd die happy if I 'd made this wheat. No one will remember Swenson, but as long as a plough is used on the soil of the state this wheat will be growing here. That 's about as much glory as anyone needs."

"Yes," said Noyes, slowly, "I was n't thinking of what he did. I was thinking of what more he might have done. He did n't complain. He got lots out of life. It 's the rest of us who are the losers."

The chief turned back to his desk with a sigh of relief.

"The rust 's worsted, anyway," he said. "Which shall we tackle next, the chinch bug or the mildew?"